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Vol. 8, No. 3 SUMMER, 1949 Price 25c

A Complete Novel

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GOOD CRIMES *are* COMING

A Preview of Cases on the Calendar for Our Next Issue

OF all weekends that have gone by in recent years none have been more celebrated—at least in literary circles—than "The Lost Weekend", Charles Jackson's great fiction bestseller of 1944. The book, a psychological study of a drunkard, details the stark adventures of Don Birnam when he succumbs to his overwhelming craving for alcohol. In the five days that follow the reader becomes acquainted with Birnam's unique mental agony as he relives most of his life up to and during that weekend.

Ray Milland, the movie actor, helped to immortalize Don Birnam's experiences in the screen version of "The Lost Weekend" with the result that people everywhere will be talking about those five unusual days in the life of one man for many years to come.

However, there is another weekend coming up soon—a weekend that will occur exclusively in the pages of the next issue of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE—and we advise all our readers to watch for it because it is destined to rock the foundations of the whodunit world.

A Real Shocker

This one is called "The Deadly Weekend", a full-length mystery novel by Fredric Brown, an old friend of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE readers and one of the greatest of the younger crop of detective story writers. Fredric Brown will be remembered for his great novel "The Dead Ringer" and for "Dead Man's Indemnity," both of which appeared for the first time in print in MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE. It was the latter novel which E. P. Dutton & Company published as "The Fabulous Clipjoint" and which subsequently won the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award as the best first mystery novel published during 1947.

"The Deadly Weekend" is a shocker—a story about a homicidal maniac, a ripper, a killer who struck always with a knife or razor—a killer whose victims had three things in common: They were women; they were beautiful and they were blonde. It's a story also about a strange black statuette of a nude woman called "The Screaming Mimi" and we guarantee that long before you've turned the last page of "The Bloody Weekend" by Fredric Brown *you'll have* the screaming *meemies!*

As an extra added attraction to the Fredric Brown book-length mystery our next issue will also feature a dramatic, swiftly paced novelet entitled "The Dog Died First" by Bruno Fischer, whose latest book-length novel "The Restless Hands," you'll be reading in this very issue of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE.

Days of Terror

Just as Don Birnam went through all kinds of mental torture in "The Lost Weekend," so, too, Sweeney of the Chicago *Blade* goes through his own particular torment when he comes face to face with the lovely *fourth* victim of a mysterious ripper on Chicago's State Street as he's coming out of his own "lost two weeks." And so, unknown to him, begins "The Deadly Weekend"—days of bafflement and terror and slowly-approaching doom.

Sweeney was down and out without a

nickel to his name. He'd been locked out of his rooming house. He'd lost his job on the *Blade* and he'd taken to sleeping on park benches. He was foggy-eyed from booze and he was walking across the Chicago night, debating who among his friends might be ripe for a touch when he stumbled upon a crowd in front of an apartment house.

Shoving and pushing his way through the throng, he saw a beautiful blonde in a strapless white evening gown lying face down in the lobby. The crowd was staring through the glass doors. But the reason no one had dared to enter the lobby was that a vicious looking dog was posted inside the doors, his teeth bared at the mob.

A prowl car drove up, its siren screaming. Two policemen bustled out, started for the door and stopped—stopped by the dog who looked more like a wolf than a canine. As they debated whether they should shoot the dog or try to club it into submission the blonde on the floor started to get up.

She rose slowly and with great effort. And as she rose the crowd gasped—and Sweeney with it. There was an oblong stain on the front of her white evening dress, over the abdomen. There was, also, a five-inch-long cut in the white cloth in the center of the stain.

Somebody cried: "A shiv! The Ripper!"

As the woman reeled on her feet, then fell, the policeman charged inside. One man clubbed the dog with his revolver, the other went to the blonde.

Still Alive

Fortunately, the woman was not dead. The wound in her abdomen was shallow—just a grazing cut. The ripper had missed!

She was number four—and still alive!

Later, after Sweeney got his wits about him and called in an eye-witness story to the Chicago *Blade* and got his job back, he learned from a fellow reporter about the whole grim sequence of ripper killings that had terrorized the Windy City.

Yolanda Lang, a night club dancer, was the blonde in the apartment hallway. But when she was able to talk in

(Continued on Page 156)

To People who want to write *but can't get started*

Do you have that constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

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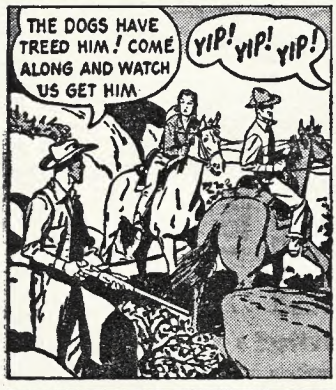
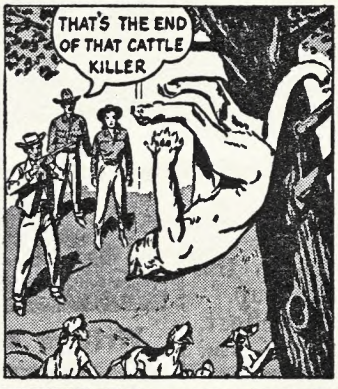
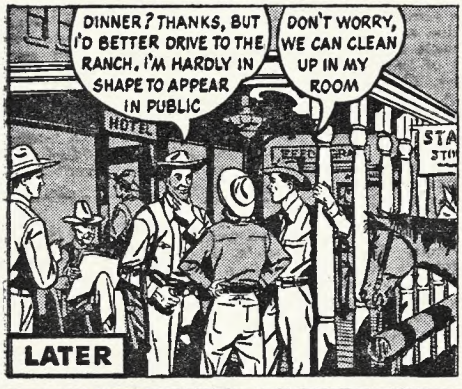
SALLY BRETT AND HER BROTHER JOE, ARE JUST TURNING HOMEWARD AFTER A DAY-LONG RIDE IN STATE CANYON FOREST WHEN . . .






DINNER? THANKS, BUT I'D BETTER DRIVE TO THE RANCH. I'M HARDLY IN SHAPE TO APPEAR IN PUBLIC
DON'T WORRY, WE CAN CLEAN UP IN MY ROOM
HOTEL
LATER

I SURE WISH YOU'D ACCEPT. THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM AT THE RANCH AND...
WE STILL HAVE A WEEK, SIS. HOW ABOUT IT?
I'D LOVE IT
HE'S SO HANDSOME!

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a novel by BRUNO FISCHER

the restless hands

Rebecca Sprague was a beautiful girl — but the very fact of her beauty brought death and terror!

1. Tony Bascomb

IN New York it wasn't easy to get hold of a gun that could be hidden in your pocket unless you had a permit or knew the right people. Tony Bascomb had no permit and the right people he knew were now for him the wrong people.

He stood at the window of his room and stared down at the sleeping street. Restless shadows and shifting shapes hovered about the stoops and doorways of the brownstone houses on the opposite side. Probably they had no physical substance. His wristwatch said four-seventeen—too soon for Bruff to have set the pieces into motion. But it wouldn't take him long.

He told himself that the effect would

be spoiled by flight, the edge would be taken off the joke. But without at least a weapon the alternative would be messy, not to mention undignified.

He packed his two bags. When they were locked he paused in front of the dresser mirror. His long fingers ran over his deeply cleft jaw. He could use a shave but his razor was packed. He still wore what he had put on for the job —corduroy trousers and a poplin jacket and a white shirt open at the throat.

What the hell, his feet were washed. He'd make a decent enough corpse. He put on his rakishly crumpled tan hat and left the rooming house. He walked west —a tall loose-jointed young man who never hurried, not even now.

At the corner a man eased out of a store doorway.

Abruptly Tony Bascomb stopped, the bags swaying against his calves. The man was gaunt and shabbily dressed. He was nobody Tony had ever seen before but that meant little. Bruff had quite an organization.

"Got a cigarette, Bud?" the man asked.

Tony put down both bags. Without taking his eyes off the man, he pulled a half-filled pack of cigarettes out of his pocket.

"Keep the pack," he said.

"Thanks, Bud."

Tony did not pick up his bags until the man was lighting a cigarette. He made himself take a dozen steps before glancing back. The man was shambling off in the opposite direction. Tony looked down at his hands holding the bags. They were reasonably steady.

HE walked two blocks north and descended to the subway and took the first local that came along. At that hour the train was almost empty. He arranged himself in a seat against a window and covered a yawn with the back of his hand. Within a few minutes he was asleep. He rode the subway until well into the morning and then ate breakfast in a midtown Manhattan cafeteria.

Stores were now open but it would be no easier to get hold of a hand gun than during the middle of the night. There was no point in hanging around New York. The war had taught him that heroics were stupid. They caused you to die sooner than you had to without doing anybody any good, particularly yourself.

He walked east on Forty-second Street to Grand Central. One hour and fifty-two minutes after the train left New York it pulled into Hessian Valley.

The station consisted of cinders on either side of the tracks. Most trains haughtily ignored it. The village started haphazardly here with half a dozen tracks and gained population as it climbed the hump that bisected the valley.

The day was mild and bright, the perfect kind that came in June according to the poet, whoever it was. But it got hotter with every climbing step and the bags kept gaining weight. At the top of the hill he reached the compact business section consisting of little more than a single city block. He stopped in front of Delmore's drugstore to rest and light a cigarette.

"Tony!"

Across the street Mark Kinard was getting out of his battered station wagon. He wore white ducks and a white T-shirt tight on his deep chest. The usual couple of locks of thick black hair straggled over his brow. They shook hands with the ardor of boyhood friends.

"Back home for a while?" Mark asked.

"Only for a couple of hours."

Mark looked across at the station wagon, then up the street, then at Tony.

"I'll give you a lift," he said, picking up one of the bags.

When they were seated in the station wagon Mark Kinard's black eyes become solemn. He concentrated on making a U-turn before he said grimly, "The police are looking for you."

"What for now?" Tony said indifferently.

"You shouldn't have left town the night Isabel was killed."

Tony leaned back in the straight seat, pushing out his legs as far as he could. "I couldn't know that she was going to be murdered."

"Of course not. But I'm telling you that the police are looking for you because you did leave. Not only Chief Cooperman but the state police."

"And your idea is that I'm ducking into town to see my mother and then right out again to avoid the cops."

"I thought you ought to know, that's all."

"Relax," Tony drawled. "There's no heat on me. Besides, I didn't murder more or less suspected, though it was pretty plain that a tramp did it."

Ahead a roadside neon sign announced —KINARD CABINS. A hundred feet back of the sign the two-story frame house was freshly painted white with green trim. To the right, in a neat

Rebecca snapped off the safety catch and slipped out of bed (Chap. VI)

Isabel if that's what's on your mind."

"Don't be a jerk," Mark said.

Tony turned his head to look out at the high school sitting on a grassy knoll. He had been kicked out of it twice but each time his mother had raised enough fuss as a widow and a taxpayer to get him reinstated.

"Who else thinks I murdered Isabel?" Tony said.

"Cut it out," Mark said irritably. "Practically everybody in town was semicircle, stood the even dozen cabins, each one with a cute little porch and a miniature lawn.

"I'll walk the rest of the way," Tony said.

Mark Kinard didn't slow the station wagon. "It's easier being driven."

"Thanks." Tony twisted in his seat. Mrs. Kinard was hanging sheets on the clothesline on the side of the house away from the cabins. "How's business, Mark?"

"Well, the season's hardly started. We expect a good summer."

"Why don't you get out of that crummy business? It's for women and old men."

Mark scowled at the windshield. "Do I have a choice?" he said.

THE station wagon swept around a quarter of a mile curve to a cluster of houses on the right side of the road. Between an imposingly gabled gingerbread house and a gleaming stucco flat-roofed house the small green-shingled cottage huddled ashamed and apologetic. Its driveway was hard dirt, pitted by pools of water lingering from a recent rain. The station wagon stopped within a few feet of the open porch.

This was the only home Tony Bascomb remembered. It wasn't much but whenever he came back it looked good to him for the first couple of hours. He got out of the station wagon and took the bags Mark handed out to him.

Once the wild jumble of grass and weeds between the porch and the road had been a lawn but you couldn't expect a widow living alone to take care of it. His mother's ten-year-old sedan was parked at the side of the house. The fenders were even more crumpled than they had been and the rear bumper was hanging by a thread. He heard himself say, "How's Rebecca?"

It was out, the subject that had hovered unspoken between them since the moment they had seen each other.

"She's all right," Mark muttered. His right hand massaged the steering wheel.

"No wedding bells?" Tony said.

"No."

"What a waste of loveliness," Tony said.

Mark's black eyes flashed. "Shut up, Tony!"

"Sure," Tony agreed amiably. He extended his hand through the station wagon window. "Thanks for the lift, Mark."

The front door led directly into the living room. It was almost always too dark in there because on bright days his mother kept the heavy curtain drawn to protect the furniture, though it was many years since sun or moths or spilled liquids could make any difference in the appearance of the overstuffed set. He left his bags there and went through the dining room and into the kitchen.

At the porcelain-topped table his mother sat drinking coffee and eating one of the sugar buns on which she practically lived. That was probably her lunch. A small white radio on a shelf above the gas range was relating an eternal soap opera.

"Tony!" Myra Bascomb said. "I didn't hear you come in."

She threw her arms about him and held him tight and kissed him. Her lips tasted like a young woman's. She wore one of her usual housecoats which fitted tightly over her short, full-blown figure.

"You're getting fat, Myra," he told her.

"And I practically starve myself." Her red mouth pouted. "Why don't you ever come to see me?"

"I've been busy."

"New York isn't so far. You could come up for a Sunday now and then."

He said, "How about some coffee?"

SHE always kept a big pot of it on the stove and toward evening, after it had been reheated half a dozen times, it could take the skin off your tongue. Because it was only noon the coffee was still drinkable. As they sat opposite each other, she went into her usual complaint about nobody caring for a lonely widow, not even her only son.

"Even your letters," she said petulantly. "All you write is that you're feeling well and you hardly ever write. You must be doing well if you sent me twelve hundred dollars last week but when people ask me what you work at I haven't the remotest idea."

"I drove a truck," he said.

"Do you make that much money driving a truck?"

"I worked overtime and saved it." He looked down at the bun in his hand. "By the way, can I have a piece of that money today? Say five hundred."

"Today?" She sounded frightened. "You're not leaving today?"

"I'm sorry but I'll have to push off this afternoon. I'm making a business trip."

"What kind of business? You never tell me anything."

"I've quit the trucking job and I'm trying to get located at something else. I'll tell you about it when it's more definite."

She sighed. "I'll go to the bank for the money as soon as I dress."

"You're a swell girl, Myra." He moved around the table and kissed her. Then he patted her shoulder and went into the living room for his bags.

His room upstairs was the way he had left it, except that now it was considerably neater. Always it was there for him to come back to. All it needed was a perpetual light in the window for the erring son.

The trunk was in the deep closet. He pulled it out and rummaged through junk until he found the shoebox in which he kept the Luger he had brought back from the war. Also in the shoebox was a box of 9 mm. cartridges. He went to the bathroom for a shower.

When he returned to his room he found Myra standing in front of the dresser, staring down at the gun.

"Tony, you—you carry a gun?"

He was wearing only a towel around his middle. He pulled the ends of the towel together and laughed bitterly. That's the German officer's gun I brought home as a souvenir. Don't you remember?"

Her pale eyes remained scared. "Tony, you're not in trouble?"

"Look, there's the trunk in which I kept the gun. I was looking for my cigarette lighter and came across the gun and took it out to see if it was getting rusty."

"Oh." She believed him as she always believed him. "There's a cigarette lighter in the dining room drawer."

"I guess that's the one."

Holding the towel about his waist with one hand, he put the automatic pistol back into the trunk. Myra moved as far as the door and paused.

"Only the other day Rebecca Sprague called up to find out how you're getting along," she told him.

"Is that so?" he said without raising his head from the trunk.

"Tony, Mr. Sprague would take you into his lumber business as a partner."

"I don't want a bribe to marry her."

"What do you want? There are a dozen men who're crazy about her."

He burst out, "Then why doesn't she marry one of them?"

Gravely she studied him. "Have you stopped loving Rebecca?"

That was one lie he couldn't get past his throat. He stooped to open one of his bags.

"You don't deny it," he heard her say triumphantly. "I can't understand you, Tony."

That was fine. He hoped the time would never come when she would begin to understand him. He dug clean underwear out of his bag. When he raised his head she was no longer in the room.

HE dressed in a white shirt and a yellow bow tie with blue dots and the gray tweed suit he'd bought when he started to work for Bruff. What the well-dressed man would wear to run like hell to wherever he was running.

The Luger presented a problem. He took it out of the trunk and shoved it into the right pocket of his jacket. The barrel was too long, the whole gun too bulky. It bulged conspicuously and a sudden movement might jut the stock into view. He stuck it into his belt and pulled his shirt down over it. Good enough if he kept his jacket buttoned and if it didn't happen to fall down into his pants. Carrying firearms was a complicated business if you didn't have the proper accessories.

The doorbell rang. He heard voices downstairs and a minute later Myra called up that there was somebody to see him.

The staircase ran down into the living room. From the head of the stairs Tony saw Carl Cooperman sitting stiffly erect on the overstuffed couch. His resplendent police hat was on his bony knees. His blue police uniform, with gun exposed in the sagging cartridge belt, was limp on his thin figure. He was the Hessian Valley Chief of Police. He was also the entire police force, except during July and August when the influx of summer visitors entitled him to a deputy or two.

Myra stood against the table, holding her robe about her throat. "Surely," she was saying, "it can't be about what happened to poor Isabel Sprague. You told me last fall that you spoke to Tony about it in New York."

"I want to talk to him," Cooperman said stolidly. "I saw him drive through town with Mark Kinard."

Tony descended the stairs. "Hi, Chief," he said affably and sat in the armchair and crossed his long legs. "How's crime?"

"There's none in Hessian Valley and I aim to keep it that way." Cooperman looked at Myra. "Mind leaving us alone, Mrs. Bascomb?"

"I certainly do mind," she said stiffly. "There's nothing you have to say to my son I can't hear."

Cooperman jabbed a skinny finger toward Tony. "You've caused trouble since you were a kid. Every time you come here there's trouble. Like the last time when Isabel Sprague was murdered."

"That's a rotten thing to say!" Myra burst out. "You know very well that as soon as I wrote him about poor Isabel he went into a New York police station and you went down there to talk to him. You told me yourself that you didn't have anything against Tony."

"I told you there wasn't any proof. Don't think I've forgotten about that murder or about all the trouble he's caused me since he was a kid."

"You've always picked on Tony," Myra protested. "Just because he was a little wild like most healthy boys—"

"Yeah, a little wild," Cooperman grunted. He stood up. "I don't want any of his wildness in my town."

"*Your* town!" Myra's body shook with indignation. "It's Tony's town and my town as much as yours. We're citizens and taxpayers."

"All right," Cooperman snapped. "But I'm paid to watch out for its peace and security." The finger came up. "How long do you aim to stay this time?"

Tony flicked ashes off his cigarette. Cooperman bored him. "Quite a while," he drawled. "And may I add that it's none of your business?"

"Well, you behave yourself while you're here," Cooperman ended on a minor note. He put on his hat, strode as far as the door, decided that he hadn't been emphatic enough. "Behave yourself," he repeated and left.

When the door closed, Myra said breathlessly, "Tony, you're really going to stay?"

Why not? Most of his life he'd been running without getting anywhere. Cooperman didn't count but other things, other people, did.

"Sure," he said.

Myra dropped down on his lap. "You don't know how happy that makes me." She snuggled up to him like a young girl.

He hoped that she couldn't feel the gun in his belt.

2. Rebecca Sprague

THROUGH the plate glass office window Rebecca Sprague saw the truck loaded with roofers roll between the two long lumber sheds and stop under the driveway arch on which was printed—HESSIAN VALLEY LUMBER CO., INC. George Dentz appeared with the order book and handed it to Mike Faye, the driver.

Rebecca typed out half the statement to Scolpini Brothers. Then she sat back, lighting a cigarette, and through the window watched sunlight turn George's hair to gold. In recent months he had acquired a mustache, a thin reddish line over his sensitive mouth. He had a poet's face that went with a slim, almost frail body. He was a marvelous dancer and a capable yard manager.

The truck rumbled away. George Dentz entered the office and gave her the tenderly sad smile he always had for her.

"You charged Scolpini too much for two-by-eights," she told him.

He came to the side of her chair. His upper arm pressed against her shoulder as he bent his head. "That's a six, not an eight. Two-by-sixes." His head dipped lower. She felt his mouth brush her temple.

"Please, George, not here."

He jerked erect. "Not here or anywhere," he said. "If that's what you mean, why not say it?"

He strode to his desk at the rear of the office. Without turning her head she knew that he was sulking. He had a way of making her feel that she was in the wrong. She typed two mistakes in one line and had to erase.

A ramshackle station wagon turned into the yard. Seconds later Mark Kinard came into the office through the back door. His spotless white ducks and T-shirt accentuated the tan of his

brawny bare arms.

He said, "How are you, Rebecca? Hello, George. How about some clear pine? Pa's making a couple of dressers for the cabin."

"Will ten-inchers do?" George asked.

"Swell. But they've got to be absolutely clear. You know how particular Pa is."

Rebecca watched Mark and George leave the office together—one so dark and wide in the shoulders, one so fair and slender. She finished the statement she was typing and then dug her compact out of her handbag. The compact was a Christmas present from Mark, the bag a Christmas present from George. Toss a coin and decide between them and perhaps it wouldn't matter how the coin fell because it had only two sides.

Her frank brown eyes looked back at her from the compact mirror. Her brown hair was worn high on her head and behind her ears to get it out of the way. Her full wide mouth required little artificial color, her healthy cheeks only a dab of powder. Attractive enough, but she didn't have what was required to get even a letter from Tony Bascomb.

She snapped the compact shut and looked at her watch. Ten after four. From the tiny inner office floated the mutter of her father talking to a salesman. One advantage of being the boss' daughter was that you could come or go any time you pleased. She cleared her desk, covered the typewriter, left the wooden office building.

The station wagon was swinging out of the driveway. Mark Kinard stepped hard on the brake. "Going home, Rebecca?"

She nodded and got in beside him. As the station wagon started to move she saw that George had come out to the road and was looking after them. Almost always, when she left before her father, George drove her home. She had wanted to save him the trouble because Mark was going her way but she knew that she had hurt him again. It wasn't easy for her to avoid hurting George.

AS they drove Mark Kinard was unusually silent. He seemed deliberately to be keeping his darkly handsome profile empty.

"Anything wrong, Mark?" she asked.

"No." Then he said, "Tony was here

"George Deetz, can you identify this woman?" Chief Cooperman was saying (Chap. X)

this morning. I picked him up as he was walking from the station."

She opened her bag for a cigarette and before her fingers found the pack she forgot that she wanted to smoke.

"He's probably gone already," Mark went on. "He told me he'd stay only a few hours."

They passed the Kinard cabins, then there was the long curve, then there was Tony's house back from the road. Nobody was outside. Tony had come and gone without having phoned her. And there were no words to be said to Mark. A wall had come between them, put there by the mention of Tony's name.

The station wagon climbed a winding tar road. Her house was the last, at the dead end. From the road it was a low rectangle of stained cedar siding and casement windows but on the other side, where it overlooked the valley, two wings jutted, forming a U. There were seven rooms, too many for what was left of the Sprague family.

Mark stopped in front of the flagstone steps leading up to the back terrace. He twisted his torso and put a strong brown hand on her arm. "Can I see you tonight?"

She was about to say yes, then thought that perhaps Tony hadn't left after all. "How about tomorrow night?"

"I'd prefer tonight and tomorrow and every day in my life but I'm used to taking what I can get."

She snapped shut her bag out of which she had not taken a cigarette and turned to the door. His hand tightened on her arm. She allowed herself to be pulled to him. She settled against him, snuggled her face into his deep chest and there was a measure of comfort in his male strength.

But he would not let it go at that. He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face and dipped his mouth to hers. Briefly her lips met his and then she drew back. He didn't try to restrain her. She stepped out of the station wagon, not hurriedly but with a sense of fleeing.

His finger was on his cheek as if her lips had left something there that could be touched. "Tomorrow at eight-thirty," he said tonelessly and leaned forward to release the handbrake.

She walked up the flagstone steps to the house.

Angie Peacock, who came in three afternoons a week to clean and sometimes prepare dinner, was spreading newspapers over the kitchen floor, which she had just finished scrubbing. Rebecca asked if anybody had phoned her.

"Nobody," Angie said. "I put the roast up at four o'clock like you told me."

Rebecca crossed the path of newspapers to the dinette and from there moved into the walnut-paneled living room. Nine months ago Tony had walked out on her when everything had been wonderful and now he was back and hadn't even taken a few minutes to get in touch with her.

On that day in September Tony had called for her in his rattle-trap coupé that made his mother's old sedan look smart and rakish. He had helped her fix a basket supper and then they had driven out to Black Rock Pond. The summer people were gone and the weekenders weren't out because it was a Tuesday, so they had the place to themselves.

The water was shockingly cold as they waded in, but when they swam it felt fine, and afterward they lay in their bathing suits on a blanket and the sun was warm on their bodies. She remembered how she kept brushing his damp hair from his brow and ran her lips softly over his face as he lay with eyes closed and one hand lazily stroking her.

The endless waiting of the war years was over and the years after he returned and would not stay, would not be pinned down. This was what she had wanted for so long now—this and what should follow, a home and a family of her own, completion at last.

SUDDENLY he said, "Let's go in again," and he leaped up and extended a hand to pull her to her feet. This time when they came out of the water the sun was sinking and no longer warmed them. They dressed and built a fire and ate and then it was getting cool and they started back. She remembered thinking as they drove with her snuggled against him that this was the most perfect day she had ever known.

Then back at her house Tony had lounged at the kitchen table while she had made coffee. Her father looked in but he wasn't very friendly because he

disliked Tony. After grunting hello and then good-bye he drove off to play gin rummy with friends. A few minutes later, as they were drinking the coffee, Isabel entered the kitchen and asked Rebecca if she knew where a flashlight was.

Rebecca would always remember how her sister had looked that evening in her pale pink-linen dress with full dirndle skirt. The square neckline was cut deep and the cherry cummerbund, wrapped tight around her waist, pushed up her fine breasts. Her blue eyes had the bright innocence of a young child.

"It's almost nine-thirty," Rebecca said. "You're not going out this late?"

"I'm twenty-two years old, remember?" Isabel said, fluffing her hair. "Isn't there a flashlight in the house?"

Rebecca told her there was one in the dining room corner cabinet. Tony turned in his chair to watch Isabel's undulating hips as she went out.

"Rebecca, you'll have a hard time remaining the family beauty," he said.

"Isabel has always been that," she said whole-heartedly. "But I do wish she wouldn't run around so much."

"The boys like it," he said.

But she hadn't wanted to talk about her sister or even think about anybody but him. Not when a perfect evening was following a perfect afternoon, with him sitting opposite her at the table and both of them having the house to themselves. But when Tony finished the coffee he stood up and said, "I'll be going."

"It's so early," she protested.

"Time for me to go."

No explanation, no excuse. He stood tall and loose-jointed with that careless, twisted smile on his thin mouth. She was too furious with him to accompany him to the door and when he said goodnight he did not even come to where she sat to kiss her.

She looked away from him to show how she felt and he simply went, having ruined the evening and the afternoon too, and she remembered thinking that it was because for so long she had allowed him to take her for granted. She resolved that for the next few days she would not make it easy for him to come to see her.

But that night he left Hessian Valley.

And at midnight she was awakened by the light on in her room and her father standing beside her bed. In the voice of a broken old man he told her that Isabel had been killed.

The pot roast needed water. She did not recall having come into the kitchen, but there she was at the stove with the pot cover in her hand. She added water to the roast, then strode determinedly into the hall and dialed a number.

Mrs. Bascomb answered.

"How are you, Rebecca?" his mother said. "Tony stepped out for a few minutes."

"Then he hasn't left yet?"

"Oh, no. He changed his mind. I'll tell him to call you back as soon as he comes in."

"Please do."

Rebecca returned to the kitchen. As she prepared the meal she kept listening for the phone to ring. Later, when her father came home and they were eating, she still listened.

"Rebecca, you're twenty-six," her father said suddenly. "Don't you want a husband and children?"

Jay Sprague's pale eyes looked anxiously at her across the table. He was a big, fleshy man with flabby features which seemed to run all together. His words always came very slowly, as if he carefully examined each one before expressing it.

"I'm hardly an old maid yet," she said.

GRAVELY he shook his head. "George Dentz is a decent, sober boy and knows almost as much about the lumber business as I do. There's a business all ready for you two and this house. He's in love with you, Rebecca."

"Father, I'll have to make up my own mind whom to marry."

"Then there's Mark Kinard," he went on. "You couldn't find a harder working boy. I don't suppose he makes much money with those cabins but I'd take him into my business."

She knew what it was. He had heard that Tony was back and he was worried. He preferred anybody but Tony.

"Please, Father!" she said.

His fork went slowly to his mouth and slowly he chewed. Then he said tiredly, "I know I'm just an old man sticking his nose into his daughter's business. But I want you to be happy."

She reached across the table to pat his hand, and she was listening for the phone to ring.

Jay Sprague drove off to a Village Board meeting, and the emptiness of the house became unbearable. She forced herself to wait forty minutes more by her watch for a phone call that did not come. Then she put on her black wool bolero jacket and left the house.

At a quarter to nine it was still daylight. When she reached the shabby little green house off the highway, dusk began to seep down.

Myra Bascomb came to the door. Behind her the living room was filled with the tumult of a radio mystery drama. And Tony lay indolently stretched out on the couch with a magazine.

"Tony, look who's here," Mrs. Bascomb exclaimed. "Did you call her back like I told you?"

Lazily he was getting up to his feet. He ran a hand through his chaotic hair. "Hello, Rebecca," he said.

"Come in," Mrs. Bascomb told her.

Rebecca stepped over the threshold and closed the door. "How are you, Tony?"

Rebecca lifted the pistol and fired (Chap. XIII)

"Okay." He tossed his cigarette into the dead fireplace and scratched his cheek. Rebecca felt herself become warm and flushed.

"I'll go into the kitchen and leave you two alone," Mrs. Bascomb said brightly. On the way out she tossed Rebecca an encouraging smile.

Then Rebecca was alone with him and it was no different. Tony moved, but away from her. "She keeps the damn radio blaring day and night," he said, switching it off.

Rebecca said, "Didn't you intend to call me back?"

"It slipped my mind."

"In other words, you don't want to see me."

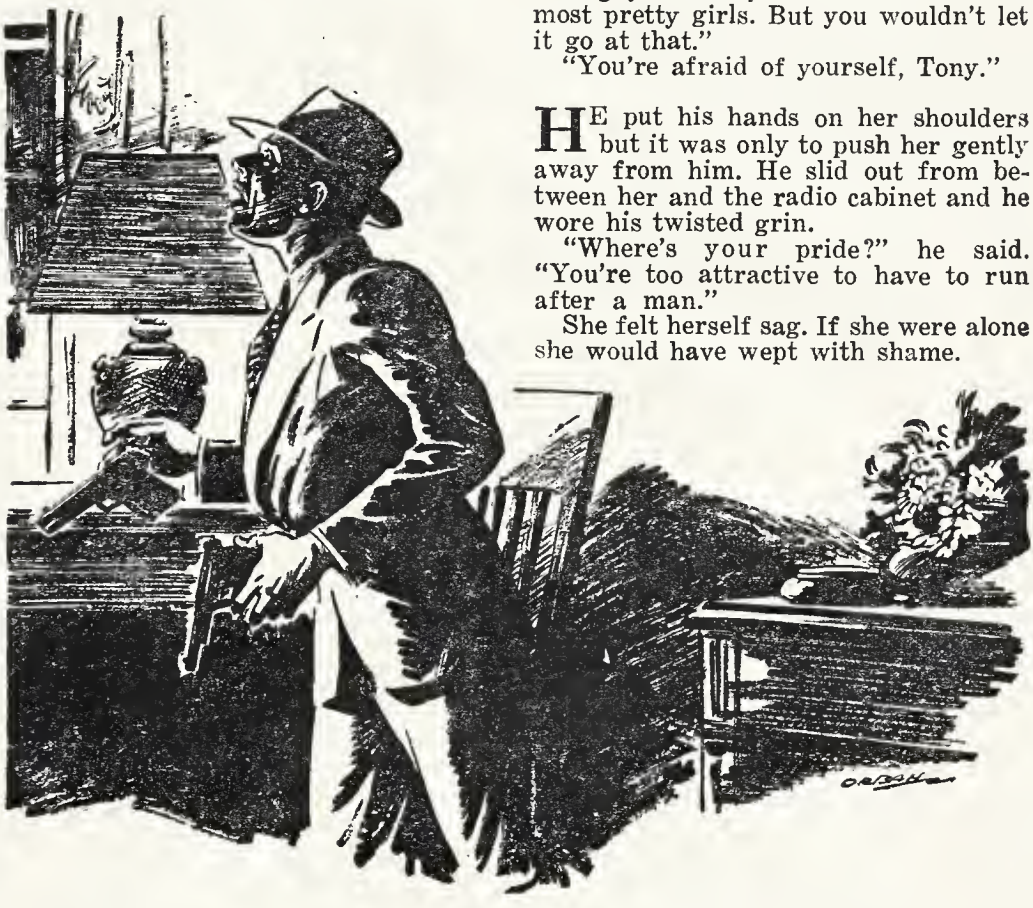
His long body leaned negligently against the radio cabinet. His yellow and blue bow tie gave his thin face a juvenile look. He wasn't handsome—not with the virile handsomeness of Mark or the ethereal handsomeness of George —but handsomeness wasn't anything. She wanted to kiss the deep cleft in his chin.

"Maybe I was afraid to face you,"

he said with that lopsided grin of his. "After all, the cops are still wondering why I left town so suddenly that night. You must be wondering too."

"Tony, it never entered my mind—"

"Sure it did. The night Isabel was murdered I took a powder. You added



that up and got the same notion as the cops."

"Tony, stop it!" she said. "You wouldn't have gone from me to Isabel. You certainly wouldn't have killed her."

"You don't know anything about me, sweetheart."

She crossed the room to him then. His bow tie was crooked. She straightened it, standing very close to him.

"I know that you care for me, Tony," she said.

He kept his hands at his sides, not touching her. "Get wise to yourself, sweetheart. I don't give a damn for anybody but myself."

She put her hands flat on his chest. Her head was tilted back, her lips parted.

"No good, Rebecca," he said mockingly. "You're not the coquettish type."

"I'm whatever type you make me be."

"Look," he said. "It would be fun taking you in my arms. It's fun with most pretty girls. But you wouldn't let it go at that."

"You're afraid of yourself, Tony."

HE put his hands on her shoulders but it was only to push her gently away from him. He slid out from between her and the radio cabinet and he wore his twisted grin.

"Where's your pride?" he said. "You're too attractive to have to run after a man."

She felt herself sag. If she were alone she would have wept with shame.

"You've taken my pride long ago," she told him in a voice she strove to keep from breaking.

"I don't want your damn pride. All I want is to be let alone."

Blood rushed to her cheeks. She strode to the door, forcing herself to keep her shoulders squared and her head high and her face expressionless.

He was at the door before her. He opened it. "I'll walk you home."

"No."

He followed her out to the porch. Twilight was deepening into night.

"At least let me get you a flashlight," he said.

She made no reply. She went down the porch steps and felt the muddy driveway under her feet. When she reached the road she glanced back. Tony stood on the porch in the flow of light from the open door at his back. She did not again look in that direction.

As yet there was no moon and only a handful of stars in the sky. The road was only dimply visible. Now and then a car passed, but she always stepped far to the side of the road. She would not have accepted a lift if one had been offered because she was weeping softly. She had asked for his contempt and the pain of it had physical weight inside her. She took her handkerchief out of her bolero pocket and wiped her eyes and blew her nose but she continued to sniffle.

By the time she reached Digby Road there was no light. She could stick to the road only by the feel of its tarred firmness underfoot and even so she strayed off it several times.

Suddenly she stopped, her body rigid. On her right, where there was nothing but brush, there had been a sound of movement. She stood listening and heard nothing.

A dog, probably, but why was it so quiet now? It should continue to move.

Nerves, she told herself. The fear of being alone in darkness since what had happened to Isabel. The nearest house was quite a distance up this hilly road. She walked on, trying to move more quickly, but when she did she blundered off the road.

Without another warning he was on her. Hands touched the back of her neck.

A scream ripped from her throat as she twisted her body, sliding away from those groping fingers. And she saw him, a dark shape in front of her, the face a vague lighter blob in the night. The shape leaned toward her and hands were on her body. They rose to her throat.

She thrust both fists against the solid wall of flesh and threw herself backward. The hands, moving for her throat, momentarily lost contact with her. She turned and ran.

Ahead and to the left there were the lights of the Trumble house, two houses before her own. If she could reach it. . . .

He was running after her. She heard his shoes slap the tar road, the sound of them so terribly close. She would be caught as her sister Isabel had been caught months ago.

The road was no longer under her feet. She was wading uphill through tall grass, and it was like fleeing through a nightmare sea of molasses. His hand was on her again, on her shoulder. She screamed but the scream was cut off by those hands closing about her throat from behind.

All at once he was gone.

She was on her knees in the grass, and there was no longer the pressure of his body on her back, of his hands on her throat. The ground in front of her was illuminated by light growing brighter and brighter. And only then did she hear the car.

She pushed herself up to her feet and looked directly into glaring headlights. The man who had attacked her was not in sight.

The car had stopped. Mr. Trumble was coming out of it in a rush.

"Rebecca!" he said. "I heard somebody scream."

She sagged against him.

3. Mark Kinard

AT ten-thirty the blinds of Cabin Seven were still drawn. The couple in it were entitled to stay until noon without paying for an extra day but Mark Kinard felt that they were part of the endless conspiracy to make his work harder. The sooner they got out, the sooner he would have all the cabins set for the next crop of tourists and be free for other work.

He stripped the beds of the other five cabins that had been occupied last night and gathered up the dirty towels and carried the load to the house. It was going to be another bright warm day. He went down the outside cellar steps and dumped the laundry on the floor between the washing machine and the ironer. Either he or Ma would wash them during the day.

On the other side of the plyboard partition that divided the cellar in two a power saw buzzed. Through the open door he saw Pa sitting on his high stool at the U-shaped bench. His crutches

were propped against a wood vise.

The bench had been designed and built by Pa so that without getting off the stool he could work his power tools. Overhead there was a rack from which his hand tools dangled. He could reach anything he needed by merely raising a hand. Directly in front of him was a long low window through which he could look out at all twelve cabins and a piece of the road. He turned off the saw. On the bench was a pile of pine boards cut to thirty-inch lengths.

"Bet they're not married, Son," Pa said.

Mark stepped all the way into the workroom. "You mean the couple in Seven? Couples that aren't married leave early, sometimes after only a few hours."

"Their car's from Michigan. Married couples on a trip like to get an early start." Pa cackled. "The unmarried couples like to linger in bed. Time you caught on, Son, you being in this business so long."

"Frankly," Mark said, "I don't give a damn."

Pa turned on the sander and started to smooth the edges of the boards. For a while Mark stood watching him.

Allen Kinard was built like his son, short in torso and wide in the shoulders, but since his accident he had become soft as putty. His skin was pasty, mottled. He hated to sit in the sun. He said it gave him a headache. The fact was that he hadn't the patience to sit anywhere except at his workbench, as if he required some sort of physical work to justify his existence. He had constructed about everything possible for the cabins and the house—cabinets and tables and chairs and dressers and Venetian blinds.

"This is nice pine," Pa observed, running a hand affectionately over the board.

"I have influence at Sprague's."

Pa cackled. "I guess you have, Son."

Mark returned to the other cellar room and took a broom out of the closet. He held it for a long moment as if making up his mind what to do with it. "Damn it, why should I?" he said aloud.

He thrust the broom back into the closet and went up the unpainted wooden steps to the kitchen. The vacuum cleaner was running in the living room. He turned into the hall and took the stairs up to the second floor two at a time and burst into Emily's room.

She wasn't asleep, which was something, but she was in bed. She pulled her hands out from behind her head and yanked the blanket up to her throat.

"You can at least knock before you come into my room," his sister said haughtily. "I might have been dressing."

"How about some of that modesty when you parade about the house in your panties?"

"Please don't be crude, Mark." Emily tapped fingers against her mouth to cover a simulated yawn.

SHE wasn't as phony as that outside the house. She had been born ten years after Mark, which made her very much the baby of the family, and this affectation of what she considered a bored and sophisticated manner was an attempt to show that she was grown up.

Physically she was mature enough, built chunkily like her father and brother. She was too thick in the legs and too wide in the torso, though her face was swarthily pretty, helped a lot by intense dark eyes. The boys liked her. And she liked the boys.

"It's eleven o'clock," he said. "Even for a fine lady like you it's time to get up."

"Are you the master of the household?" Her tone was very bored. "You seem to forget you're only my brother."

He moved closer to the bed. "Ma's working and I'm working and even Pa's working. You'll do your share. You'll get out of bed and clean the cabins. And while you're at it scrub the bathrooms."

"I don't care in the least for your tone of voice." Emily turned her cheek against the pillow.

He found himself shouting. "If you want to act like a child I'll treat you like one. What you need is a good spanking."

That jarred her. Her dark eyes showed panic.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?" He couldn't keep his voice under control. "Don't clean the cabins this morning and you'll find out."

He slammed out of the room and went downstairs. Ma had finished vacuuming the living room rug and was now dusting the furniture.

"What were you shouting about?" she asked him quietly.

"That damn kid!" he said. "Lying in bed all morning."

"She was out late last night."

"With whom?"

"She drove to the movies in Danbury with Bob Hutch. She didn't get home till after two in the morning."

"In the middle of the week. And you think that's okay?"

"Well, Bob is a decent boy."

"That's not what I hear," Mark said. "And what did they do between the time the movies got out and two o'clock? The drive isn't anywhere that long."

Ma shook her head as if she were too tired to think of a comment and resumed dusting the upright piano which nobody in the family had ever played. Rose Kinard was tall for a woman, which made her almost as tall as Mark, but there was little to her except bones. She was five years younger than her crippled husband and looked ten years older. Her hair was stringily gray. Her narrow face was beaten and worn. Whenever Mark felt too sorry for himself he thought of his mother.

"Why should Emily have it so much easier than the rest of us?" he persisted.

"She's not eighteen yet."

"Then let her go back to school."

"She doesn't like school."

"No," he said, "all she likes is to run around with boys while I work for her."

Ma put the dust cloth down and let her breath out in a sigh. Since Mark could remember she had worked too hard, even before the accident to Pa, and she was sickly. When her varicose veins didn't bother her it was her ulcers, yet she plodded on day and night with a weary restlessness that never let her stop working even when there seemed to be nothing to do.

"You shouldn't have come back from California," she told him. "We could have managed. I would have hired somebody to help."

"And let wages eat up the profits of this lousy business." He rocked on the balls of his feet. "All I ask is that Emily pitch in. By God, I'm going to see that she cleans the cabins this morning."

"I'll clean them," Ma said quietly.

"Why shouldn't Emily?"

"I'll ask her to help me. There's no need to get so excited."

He opened his mouth and clamped it shut without saying anything. What was the use? He went out through the front door and stood in the sun. The Michigan car was still parked beside Cabin Seven. The blinds were still drawn. He wiped his face with his pocket handkerchief.

He should have remained in California. That was easy enough to say. He should have finished high school and gone to college. He should get out of this damn town and make a career for himself. But he was in a trap and he had been in it most of his life.

EVEN when he was a school kid, when all of his activity should have been having fun with his friends, when his father was hale and hearty and working. "My father's the fire chief," he used to boast to new kids and they had been impressed.

But in Hessian Valley that had meant that Allen Kinard was one of the two full-time paid employees of the volunteer fire department, with a salary that wasn't enough to support a family decently. So they had put up four tourist cabins to make extra money. The idea was for Ma to run them but actually most of the work had fallen on him even then.

When he still had a year to go in high school Pa had fallen through the roof of a burning building and injured his spine. The pension wasn't enough and Mark had had to quit school and work in Burke's filling station. Later they had managed to borrow enough to erect eight more cabins and make a fair income out of them but then the war had come and gas rationing and the tourist business was shot.

He and Tony Bascomb had gone together to enlist in the army. Tony was taken and he was turned down. A bum kidney. There was fair money to be made in war industries but not in Hessian Valley. Instead of getting a job fairly close to home in the Tarrytown aircraft factory he traveled clear across the country to work on planes. California was as far away as he could get. And when the war ended and his job ended he came back because the tourist business was booming again and the family needed him.

So back he was in the trap and his family was only part of it. There was

Rebecca Sprague. For a long time, at the very beginning of high school, there had been Rebecca Sprague. Then she had become Tony's girl and he had had to go through the motions of grinning and bearing it because Tony was his best friend and anyway there was nothing he could do about it. If after the war she and Tony had married it would have been an accomplished fact, definite, finished. But hope went on and hope was a trap.

Yesterday afternoon she had kissed him on the cheek. That was all he had got out of life—a kiss on the cheek.

There was work to be done. The Cabin Three shower leaked, wasting hot water. He started for the cellar to get a wrench and washers.

A snappy convertible with the top down came up the road. He recognized it as George Dentz' and waved. George swung over to the left side of the road and braked sharply. Mark cut across the lawn.

"Did you hear about Rebecca?" George said before Mark reached the car.

Mark's stride broke. "What?" That was all he could get past his suddenly constricted throat.

"Somebody grabbed her and tried to choke her. Last night near her house. But she wasn't hurt."

Mark's fingers closed over the left door. He noticed now the grayness of George's normally pale face.

"Who was it?"

"It was too dark for her to get a look at him," George said. "What saved her was that Joe Trumble came along in his car. The man ran away. Joe Trumble didn't see him either."

"Like Isabel," Mark whispered.

George nodded, staring through the windshield. "I just came from there. Mr. Sprague wouldn't let me come in to see her. Said Dr. Slesinger gave her a sedative and she was resting in her room." He leaned sideways to push in the cigarette lighter. When he straightened up he said, "When I passed Tony Bascomb's house I saw Chief Cooperman's car outside."

Mark felt sweat on his brow and at the same time coldness deep inside him. "So Tony didn't leave yesterday after all."

"My God, it's crazy! Just like what happened to her sister last fall, only Rebecca got away." George blew smoke at the windshield, calming himself a bit. "Why is Cooperman seeing Tony?"

"He'll question everybody," Mark said. "Our turn will come. It was the same when Isabel—"

He didn't finish. He turned his head and saw Ma coming out of the house with a broom and a mop and a pail. Emily wasn't with her.

"Well, I'll be going," George said. "Mr. Sprague isn't coming to the yard today, so I'll have to take complete charge."

When George had driven off, Mark started slowly back to the house. From the porch he heard the phone ring. He ran inside to answer it. Mr. Sprague was on the wire. He said that Rebecca would have to call off the date she had made with Mark for tonight.

4. Ben Helm

BEN HELM unrolled an oilskin tobacco pouch and dug his pipe into it. His left shoulder was to the picture window. With the sun on the other side of the house at three o'clock he would be looking northeast, toward Connecticut. Some fifteen miles behind him would be the Hudson River. He was a York Stater himself, way back as a kid, but from farther north. It was all the same though, almost anywhere in the state—valleys and rolling meadows and heavily wooded hills.

"You can expect the fullest cooperation from our police chief," Jay Sprague was saying.

Ben rolled up his pouch. "Most cops resent private detectives horning in."

"I don't care how Cooperman feels. He'll cooperate."

Sprague's tone implied that Cooperman had better if he wanted to keep his job. He was a member of the Village Board. That was one of the first things he had told Ben yesterday over the phone.

"Why should Chief Cooperman complain?" Rebecca said. "He failed."

She stood with the backs of her thighs against a table. A cigarette drooping from the corner of her full mouth sent tendrils of smoke across

her face. Her thin yellow sweater was filled ripely and neatly. Her fine brown legs were bare to the ankles.

"I'll do all I can on a murder that's almost a year old," Ben Helm said.

Sprague dry-washed his big white hands. There was an old woman flabbiness about his ponderous body. "The attack on Rebecca was only two days ago. It's clear that it was the same man who killed Isabel."

Rebecca Sprague twisted her torso to crush out her cigarette in an ashtray behind her. The blunt statement shook her but that healthy bloom was as much a part of her delicately rounded face as the bone structure.

"You've given me odds and ends," Ben said, "but not the picture."

Sprague sank deeper into his chair. His words came with the effect of dripping molasses.

"There are few actual facts. That evening last September Isabel left the house at about nine-thirty. There is a path over this hill and through the woods to the highway—a short cut to the village. About an hour later one of the local boys, Mark Kinard, came along the path and found her. She was lying beside Cream Brook. Mark ran to Dr. Slesinger's house which is only a quarter of a mile away. They returned together. She was dead. Choked to death by a pair of hands."

"Was she dead when he found her?"

"Mark said that he thought she was but he ran straight to the nearest doctor. That is what anybody would have done."

"Uh-huh. Whom was she going to see?"

Sprague took out his handkerchief to dab at his mouth. "We never learned. The police questioned all her friends, but not one expected a visit from her that night. I am inclined to believe that she intended to drop in unexpectedly on one of her girl friends."

"Unexpectedly at that hour without having phoned first?"

Rebecca uttered a small sound.

SPRAGUE turned cumbersomely in his chair to look at her. "Did you say something, Rebecca?"

"No." Her head dipped as she held a match to a fresh cigarette.

Ben said, "What sort of girl was Isabel?"

"Sort?"

"How old? What did she look like? Any particular boy friends?"

"She would have been twenty-two in another month. No, she was not going consistently with any one boy." Sprague waved his handkerchief toward the baby grand piano in the far corner of the room. "There's a picture of her."

Ben crossed to the piano. The photo in a standing plastic frame showed head and shoulders. She was the baby-face type, eyes far apart and innocent, mouth small and painted to form a bow. Pretty would be the only word for her—pretty as a toy.

"How was she with the boys?" Ben said. "Wild? Anything like that?"

Angrily Sprague snapped his handkerchief. "My daughter was a decent girl.

Ben glanced at Rebecca. She had put on a dead pan.

"The fact remains that she set out to go somewhere that night," Ben said. "Miss Sprague, wouldn't she have told you?"

"Before she left she came into the kitchen to ask me for a flashlight," Rebecca replied. "I asked her where she was going. She didn't tell me."

Ben turned his head. "Mr. Sprague, was there any man you had forbidden her to see?"

"Certainly not."

"Then why didn't whoever she was going to see that night call for her at the house? That's the way it was done when I took girls out."

"We don't know that she was going to meet a man."

"She was going somewhere," Ben persisted. "She had to have reason to walk along a dark path at night and refuse to tell her sister where she was going. Say a married man who didn't want anybody to know he was seeing her."

"No. Isabel wasn't like that."

Ben shrugged. "Didn't the police suspect anybody at all?"

"They suspected a tramp," Sprague said. "The state police and Cooperman milled around for a couple of days and questioned everybody in the community. Then the state police said it must have been a tramp and left." His handkerchief was a crumpled ball in one big fist.

"But the fact is that she wasn't as-

saulted. Her clothes weren't torn in the least. There wasn't a mark on her. She had thirteen dollars in her handbag and a two-hundred-dollar ring on her finger and an expensive watch on her wrist. Nothing was taken. Wouldn't a tramp at least have robbed her?"

"Unless he got panicky when he realized that he'd killed her. Or maybe he heard this Mark Kinard approach and beat it."

"That's what the police said," Sprague told him.

"Anything else the police said?"

"Well—" Sprague spread the handkerchief across his knees, smoothening it. "They were curious about one of our local boys. Tony Bascomb is his name. He left town that very night. He has a bad reputation. Ever since he was a boy he has been getting into trouble with the police."

"Father!" Rebecca had straightened up against the table. "That's not fair. Chief Cooperman spoke to Tony in New York and said he had nothing against him."

"Cooperman said that he could prove nothing. You've always been so crazy over Tony that—"

"Father!"

Sprague's heavy face set into sullen, bitter lines. "I never said anything because I trusted your good sense. So many fine, upright young men and you've wasted your years on him."

She strode out of the room.

"Rebecca," Sprague called weakly.

THROUGH the broad doorway Ben watched her turn up the hall and disappear.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Helm," Sprague said quietly. "My daughter and I almost never quarrel." Tired, he put away his handkerchief. "Nerves. Isabel gone and then this attack on Rebecca. I shouldn't have said anything to hurt her. I'm afraid, Mr. Helm. Terribly afraid."

Ben looked out at what was visible of the village below the hill. The scattered buildings were neat doll houses under bright sunlight and, through a break in the trees, a toy train panted across the valley.

"You see, we wanted to believe that it was a stranger, a tramp," Sprague said after a minute. "That would make it somehow less horrible. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Uh-huh. If it was a tramp it was only bad luck that she happened to walk along the path at that time. A trick of fate, like taking a plane that crashes. But if it wasn't a tramp, it meant deliberate murder, perhaps planned in advance. It meant that the killer could be anybody in the community—a friend, a neighbor, somebody you saw every day in the street."

"Yes," Sprague said, looking at his hands. "We wanted to believe that it was a tramp. And then Tuesday night Rebecca was attacked in the same way." He glanced at the door through which Rebecca had gone and lowered his voice. "Tony Bascomb came back to Hessian Valley that day. He hadn't been back since the night Isabel was killed."

"I don't care for coincidences," Ben said, "but they happen."

"The same man murdered one of my daughters and now he's trying to murder the other," Sprague insisted.

"Meaning Tony Bascomb?"

[*Turn page*]

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"I mean nobody. I know only that the way to protect Rebecca is to find who murdered Isabel. Your fee strikes me as high but I won't quibble."

Ben Helm clicked the stem of his pipe against his teeth. It was simple to Sprague. You were recommended, so I sent for you to go out and find the killer. Succeed by yourself where the state police and the local cop failed nine months ago. Pick out of the night the man who, a couple of nights ago, grabbed another girl by the throat. Your fee for doing this is rather high but why quibble?

Well, what did he expect in this business he'd set himself up in? The regular police solved the easy ones. He got what was left, the unsolvable cases.

He stood up. "I left my bags on the terrace. Can you suggest a place for me to stay?"

"Here, of course. We have plenty of room."

"Thanks but I prefer not to live with my boss."

Sprague frowned. "Wouldn't it be better? By living here, you can give my daughter some measure of protection."

"That's part of what I mean," Ben said. "I'm not a bodyguard. I'll be away a great deal. I wouldn't want her to depend on me—though she ought to have protection."

"She has a gun. Cooperman got it for her this morning as well as a permit. Of course I won't let her out of the house alone, particularly at night."

REBECCA came in from the dinette. "Father, I think Mr. Helm will be comfortable at Mark's," she said—and Ben wondered how long she had been listening in since she had stalked indignantly out of the room. Nothing in her tone or manner showed a trace of rancor toward her father.

"She means the Kinard Cabins half a mile down the road," Sprague explained. "I'll drive you there."

"I'd like to see the path first. Miss Sprague, would you mind showing it to me?"

"I'll take you," Sprague said.

"If you don't mind I'd rather your daughter did."

Sprague glanced at Rebecca, who stood in the hall doorway in an attitude of patient waiting. His nod was a drooping of his head.

The path started where Digby Road came to a dead end and a hundred feet past the house. It ran across a gently sloping meadow overgrown with sumac, then cut into a jumble of birches and brush and an occasional stunted oak. Here it began to dip and wind, following the east contour of the hill.

They had to walk in single file. Rebecca led. Growth was closing in on the path and every now and then they had to pause to push aside overhanging arms of thorn-studded blackberry bushes.

"This path doesn't seem to be used much," Ben commented.

"It isn't. Only the few families on Digby road use this end and then very seldom. The road is more comfortable."

"But your sister did that night."

Rebecca paused without turning her head, then walked on. "That's another thing. Isabel didn't like to go anywhere by herself at night. She was more or less afraid of the dark."

The ground leveled off somewhat. He kept a dozen feet behind her and that gave him a chance to admire her vigorous free-swinging stride. Her figure was as devoid of straight lines and angles as her face but the curves swept long and clean and, unlike most women, she didn't walk with her hips. She looked good in sweater and skirt. She was the kind of woman, he thought, who would look good in anything or nothing.

Suddenly Rebecca stopped. "Now that you have me away from Father," she said, "what do you want to ask me?"

"Was Isabel a hell-raiser?"

"Not if you mean drinking and things like that. She wasn't noisy. In her own quiet way she liked men. Lots of them."

"Who were the ones she was seeing at the time?"

"Sisters are supposed to confide in each other but she hardly ever did in me." Rebecca smiled wanly. "When Mother died it was up to me to run the household. Isabel considered me too bossy. I'm afraid I was."

"Didn't her boy friends come to the house?"

"I don't know if every one did," she said and resumed walking.

Abruptly a brook, swollen by spring rains, appeared. The path ran into a couple of twelve-inch planks laid end to end across the brook on stones which

did not provide a particularly stable base. She crossed with the assurance that was so much a part of her. Then, standing straight and utterly still, her handbag held along her thigh, she waited for him to make a more cautious crossing.

"Cream Brook," she said in a voice suddenly flat and colorless. "This is where Isabel was killed."

ON the side of the brook from which they had approached, trees and brush ran into the water but on this side there was a semi-circular clearing. A huge flat rock dominated the open space. Around it the ground was flat and partially covered by moss.

There were two or three ragged circles of ashes, remnants of more or less recent camp fires. Tall trees farther back would obstruct direct sunlight during most of the day. It was cool here and placid and the clear brook racing past rocks gurgled gently.

"Good place for love-making," Ben commented.

"The younger kids come here on summer evenings and build fires and sit around necking."

"Did Isabel?"

"Probably."

Beyond the clearing the path resumed its way through the woods. He said, "This must have been her destination. You said she didn't like to walk through woods alone at night. She took this path because it's the only way to get to this spot."

"You think—" She paused to strike a match. "You think that whoever she came here to meet killed her?"

"Give me a chance to collect some facts, if any. Did you and your sister have any boy friends in common?"

She held her head high, and smoke rolled across her face. "Taking turns?"

"It didn't have to be that crude. Just dates at one time or another with the same man."

Rebecca turned her head to watch a twig caught between two stones in the brook struggle to free itself. "As far as I know our love lives never conflicted."

"Who's your boy friend?"

"What?" Then she said, "Oh," and frowned. "Isn't that rather personal?"

"Not particularly. Any gossip in the village could tell me.'

"I'm sure of it. In the past two or three years I've gone out with only two men—Mark Kinard and George Dentz."

"You didn't mention Tony Bascomb."

She blew smoke toward the brook and watched it disintegrate in the slight breeze.

He didn't rush her.

"I love Tony," she said presently. "For a long time now I've been waiting for him, though it's plain that he doesn't want me." She drew back her shoulders as if attempting to control herself. "Tony was with me the evening Isabel was murdered."

"Then that takes care of him."

"Of course it does but it didn't satisfy the police. I'm sure that Chief Cooperman will tell you that Tony left my house a few minutes after Isabel. His mother was out somewhere. When she came home at about midnight she found a note from him that he had to leave suddenly and was driving to New York."

"I see."

"You don't see!" she burst out. "Tony left that night because he was running away from me. We had spent the day on a picnic. Everything had been perfect. Too perfect for him." She mangled her cigarette under the toe of her shoe. "Tuesday afternoon I heard that he had returned. I went to see him. He turned me down cold."

"Uh-huh," Ben said. "Was it on the way home that you were attacked?"

"Yes." She tossed her head. "Have I stripped my soul naked enough for you?"

"In other words," he said, pushing the stem of his dead pipe in and out between his teeth, "if only a few minutes before that he'd turned you down cold, he'd hardly follow you home and try to strangle you. That's what you're getting at."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"All that's obvious is that you kicked around your self-respect to try to clear him. It doesn't. Maybe he was running away from you that night last September but maybe he was coming here to meet your sister." He held up a hand as she opened her mouth. "We don't know. Any more than we don't know that he didn't follow you from his house Tuesday night."

"But why? That's not reasonable."

"Maybe not reasonable to a normal rational mind."

HER gaze lifted from his face to his hair thinning at the temples. Her voice came from deep inside her. "A madman?"

"A murderer, which is the same thing in a way. I don't like to frighten you but I've got to impress on you not to trust anybody, not even a man you love. Do you understand that?"

She didn't answer. She had turned slightly so that now her left shoulder and delicately rounded profile were to him.

"Well, let's go on to the village," he said. "I want to follow this path all the way."

She said woodenly, "Just continue. The path comes out on the highway close to Kinard's cabins. I'm going home."

"I'll go back with you."

She housed herself, setting a smile to her lips. "I'm armed," she said, tapping her handbag. "Remember?"

"May I see your gun?"

She took it out of her handbag. It was a little .25-caliber Colt automatic less than five inches in length. The magazine was loaded to capacity with six cartridges. Not particularly deadly unless a vulnerable spot was hit but adequate to scare anybody who tried to attack her—if he gave her a chance to get it out of her bag.

"Do you know how to use it?" he asked.

"When Tony returned from the war he taught me how to shoot a gun he brought back. A German gun — a Luger."

"Pretty heavy for a woman."

"It was much too heavy for me. It jumped so in my hand. But this gun is better. I tried it out this morning in back of the house with Chief Cooperman. I actually hit a big tree at forty feet." She dropped the gun into her bag. "Not that I could ever bring myself to kill anybody."

"If you had to?"

"Not even then, I think. But Father feels better if I have a gun." She brought that set smile back, broadening it a little. "As I'm armed you don't have to walk me back. Father or I will drive your bags down to your cabin."

She crossed the planks, and on the other side of the brook she turned to say good-by. He waited until she was out of sight before following. He kept close enough behind so that he could hear and occasionally glimpse her. When he reached the edge of the meadow at the end of Digby Road he stopped and watched her until she entered the house.

5. George Dentz

AT closing time George Dentz phoned the boss to tell him that the furring which Cobalt had delivered an hour ago was pretty crummy stuff.

"Is that so?" Mr. Sprague didn't sound as if he cared what went on in his business. "I may be in tomorrow. For a little while. anyway."

He was keeping Rebecca at home and staying with her, though during the day she would be at least as safe here in the office where there were husky yard men within call.

"I'd like to speak to Rebecca," George said.

There was the thinly muted hum of an empty wire. George assumed that he had left the phone to call her but it was Mr. Sprague's voice he heard again, saying, "I prefer that you don't come to see her for a few days. Good-by."

George sat holding the dead phone against his elbow. Mr. Sprague hadn't put it into words, but he had said plainly enough—"I don't trust any man to be close enough to her to strangle her. That includes you."

He cradled the phone, put on his hat, snapping the brim. Everybody had already left. It was past eight. He had stayed so late to do some of Mr. Sprague's and Rebecca's work. He locked the office and went out to his car.

Too late to go home for dinner. Aunt Gertrude served promptly at seven and if you couldn't make it you ate out. He stopped off at Delmore's drugstore for as much food as a soda fountain provided.

After that he was just a guy who had an evening ahead with nothing to do. Girls? He had never had trouble getting girls. In his pocket there was a supply of phone numbers. But the one number that meant anything to him he had already called and this time it was her

father who had brushed him off. Generally she did it herself, though these days he did manage to average about one date a week with her. Just enough to keep him chained to her—not enough to commit himself in any way.

On the open highway he sent the speedometer needle up to seventy. He enjoyed the feel of the convertible's smooth silent power and the wind in his face. He'd paid too much for it, of course, but what else was there to do with his money?

He slowed the car when he neared the Red House. At this time the younger crowd would be gathering at the juke joint and maybe an evening of dancing wouldn't be completely wasted. The girls were crazy about dancing with him and some of them for more than dancing. But when the rambling log juke joint appeared he stepped on the gas again. A moodiness was upon him, a resentment against all women.

Blame Rebecca for that. Blame her for leaving nothing for him but to drive aimlessly alone in a car meant for two.

He had swung back to the village. There the highway became Grand Street with its brief stretch of sidewalk and stores and a couple of traffic lights. He was waiting for the second traffic light to turn green when a woman came up to the door of the car.

"How about a lift?" she asked.

She wore a purple linen suit and a little red straw hat with a big bunch of purple grapes hanging down one side. Her lips were purple too. Instead of eyebrows she had painted arches extended practically to her prominent cheekbones. Her face was narrow and somewhat gaunt but all the work she had put into it made it as snappy and modern as his bright new convertible.

"Sure," he said, opening the door for her. When she was seated beside him he added with a gallant smile, "I'll be glad to drive you anywhere you want to go."

SHE looked him over speculatively. He was used to that from women. Then she crossed her legs and decided to return his smile. They were nice legs but her smile was brittle. In fact her entire face was brittle, as if it would come apart under soap and water.

"I want to go about a mile up this road," she said. "That's where a guy down the street told me it was. Aren't there any cabs in this hick town?"

"There's one run by a man named Al Schmid but you generally have to call him at his home to get him. Did you come from the station?"

"Yeah. Had to hoof it up a hellish hill in these high heels."

The light was red again, so he continued to sit turned toward her. She was built neatly enough if a trifle top-heavy. She looked as if she knew all the answers, which made her exciting. A weekend bag rested on the floorboard beside her extremely high-heeled open-toed shoes. She was visiting somebody, probably summer people who had come up early. That opened possibilities.

The light changed and he sent the convertible forward. "Here for a visit?"

"Know somebody named Bascomb?"

"Mrs. Bascomb or Tony?" he asked, though the answer was obvious.

"Tony. Know him?"

"Yes."

"Know if he's in town?"

"I know he was here yesterday morning."

She nodded and draped her hands limply on her lap. Her fingernails were also purple.

"From New York City?" he said after a pause.

"Yeah." She focused her attention on the countryside, quiet and lush in the twilight.

Then they were there, turning into the rutted, muddy driveway. The twilight was deep enough for house lights, but none showed.

She scowled at the green cottage. "This Tony's dump?"

"Yes. It doesn't look as if anybody's home."

She got out of the car, leaving the bag on the floorboard. "Wait a second, will you?" she said over a shoulder. Her shoes weren't intended for walking over rough ground. She did better when she mounted the porch. Through the windshield he watched her knock at the door, try to open it, turn the knob.

Was Tony Bascomb entitled to the whole world? Rebecca and this exciting woman and how many others?

She returned to the car. "Who does Tony live with?"

"His mother."

"Guess I couldn't spend the night here anyway," she said. "Know where I can?"

"There are tourist cabins near here."

"Okay."

She got into the car and crossed her legs. He backed out of the driveway. Around the curve and she would be gone and there would no nothing left but an empty evening.

"By the way," he said, "my name is George Dentz."

"Hello, George. I'm Jeannie Poole."

An exchange of names was an opening. He plunged into it. "How about a drink?"

"I'm tired from the trip and walking up that hill."

"A drive would be restful," he persisted.

He got another of those speculative looks from her. If she was appraising him it would turn out all right. He knew that he had what women liked. But in this case it didn't seem to be enough.

"All I want right now is some sleep," she said.

The Kinard lights appeared — the neon sign and the two floodlights between the house and the cabins and glowing windows in the main house and some of the cabins. George swung his car into the cinder driveway and rolled it close to the house. Mark Kinard was sitting on the porch with another man.

"Hey, Mark," George called, "I have a customer for you."

Mark said something to the man and both came down the porch together. George reached for her bag and got out and went around the car to open Jeannie Poole's door.

"Mr. Helm would like to meet you, George," Mark said. "He's a detective."

JEANNIE POOLE'S painted eyebrows arched and her mouth fell open. George's eyes shifted, watching her. In a moment she recovered, tightening her mouth, making her brittle face static.

"Private detective," Helm was explaining affably. "I'm working on the Sprague case."

George shook the hand extended to him, then said to Mark, "Miss Poole would like to spend the night."

Mark's eyes swept over her figure. She was ruining it by the sloppy way she stood, her weight on one hip and her shoulders rounded. He took her bag from George. "Come with me, please."

Gingerly, as if walking barefooted on pebbles, she moved at Mark's side in her stiltlike shoes. Twenty feet away she turned. "Thanks for the ride, George."

At least she remembered his name. George decided that after she was settled in her cabin he would knock at her door and ask if there was anything else he could do for her. Maybe by then she would want to go out with him for a drink.

"Mind coming up on the porch?" Helm was saying. "We'll be more comfortable."

George had heard yesterday that a detective was arriving. Mr. Sprague had told him while they were discussing office business over the phone.

This Ben Helm, Sprague had said with a kind of desperate hope, was supposed to be hot stuff in a quiet way. A kind of psychologist cop. At any rate he lectured on the psychology of crime at police schools and colleges and had written a book or two. An intellectual manhunter. And, as if to indicate that a creature like that could be human too, Mr. Sprague had added that Helm's wife was an actress.

So here he was on the job and not looking at all as menacing as even a highbrow bloodhound ought to. He was on either side of forty but not showing it on his hard lean body. His crinkly brown eyes wer amiable and in a few years he would be bald. But he sniffed out murderers and married actresses.

As he walked with Helm to the house George glanced back. Mark and Jeannie Poole had reached the door of the cabin nearest the road. Five other cabins showed light. George doubted that that was a good night's business for June.

There was a freshly painted wicker set on the open porch. George sat in the armchair, Helm in the rocker. The porch light wasn't on, but the floodlights made it bright enough Helm took an oilskin pouch out and filled his pipe. He didn't seem in a hurry to get started.

"You'll be wasting your time," George said irritably. "I've answered

all the questions Chief Cooperman could think up."

"I know." Helm tapped his inside breast pocket. "Cooperman gave me everything he has.

From Elizabeth, New Jersey, aren't you?"

"If you have everything written out there why ask me?"

"Uh-huh." Helm smiled. He had an ingratiating smile, showing strong even white teeth stained by pipe tobacco. "At the end of nineteen forty-two you came to Hessian Valley to spend a weekend with your cousin Albert Dentz, who was about to be inducted into the army. All that winter and spring and summer you kept coming back. Ostensibly to visit your relatives but the only one you would have much in common with was Albert and he was away."

"Subtle, aren't you?" George said. "I'd met Rebecca Sprague while I was ice skating with Albert. I kept coming back to see her. What was wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I suppose, except that at that time she had a boy friend, Tony Bascomb, who was fighting in Africa."

MARK came out of the cabin. He was walking across the flood-lighted lawn to the rear of the house.

"Don't you think I knew it?" George said. "Rebecca told me about Tony when I asked her for a date the first time I met her. But it was all right for her to go dancing or to the movies with me. There was nothing else than that if that's what you're getting at."

"Uh-huh. Then in the summer of nineteen forty-three you were drafted."

"You have that written down too. I was deferred for a while because I was assistant manager of a textile plant in Passaic and we were doing war work. They trained me to fight and then made me a storekeeper clear across the country, clear across the Pacific and finally in Japan."

"And when you were discharged you stayed only a couple of weeks in Elizabeth. Then you came to Hessian Valley and were here ever since."

"Any objection?"

Helm rocked gently in his chair. "Your family is in Elizabeth. I understand that your parents and two sisters live in a nice house there. A young man out of the army would be looking around to get himself settled in a job or a business.

"You had worked in textiles but you didn't try to get your old job back or any other. Instead you came to Hessian Valley, where there's little opportunity for a young man. You stayed with your aunt and uncle, doing nothing, making no move to get your teeth into anything to make a living."

"I got a good job with Sprague, didn't I?"

"You didn't ask for it. He offered it to you because he heard you had executive experience. And it's a good job only in Hessian Valley."

"If you know everything," George said bitterly, "you know damn well why I came back here."

"Uh-huh. Because of Isabel Sprague."

George found that the bloodhound was frightening him. You could give a tough guy back as much as he handed out. You could shout back at him, match nastiness with nastiness. Helm seemed to be understanding and even compassionate. That was a fraud, of course. Behind the calm voice and sympathetic eyes George could sense a remorseless and deadly hardness, a mind that was a steel-edged rapier flicking out at him.

"Isabel meant little to me," George said.

"Little?"

"All right, nothing. A detective ought to know what everybody in town knows. I came back for thet same reason Mark Kinard came back and is hanging on here. For the same reason Tony Bascomb comes and goes. I suppose you've seen Rebecca Sprague."

"A very attractive girl."

"That's only part of it. I've known beautiful women. She's got something extra." George brooded down at his feet. "She gets into your blood."

"But she was still Tony Bascomb's girl when you returned to Hessian Valley."

Mark appeared from the rear of the house. He carried towels and a guest towel.

"All right, so she was Tony's girl. So I was merely crazy. George ran his thumbnail over his thin, reddish mustache. "Does a detective fall in love?"

"You'd be surprised."

"That's right, you're married to an

actress. Do you want her with you?"

Helm stopped rocking. "Uh-huh."

"Then maybe you know how it is to want a woman you love and never stop wanting her for one moment day or night."

"I know." Helm frowned at his pipe, then applied a fresh match to it. "But you were seen at least twice with Isabel Sprague."

"I was seen with lots of other girls in town."

"Though you love Rebecca?"

GEORGE stood up and went as far as the porch railing. Mark was still in Jeannie Poole's cabin. He turned, half-sitting on the rail.

"A lot of good it did me. Tony Bascomb was in town then, which meant that I was out of the picture. He'd come and go. Whenever he left there was hope again. At any rate I'd have only Mark Kinard to worry about. Then Tony would come back suddenly—the way he came back the other day."

"Uh-huh."

George didn't like the sound of that. He stared at the detective, who had resumed rocking gently.

"I get it," George said gently. "I'm supposed to have tried to choke Rebecca Tuesday night because Tony came back."

"I didn't say that."

"Not in words, but that's what all your talk has been leading to. If that's the case, why was I supposed to have killed Isabel?"

"You tell me."

The detective's face was like a hawk's now. He had a thin patrician nose, which at a certain angle looked like a beak.

George said testily, "Isabel was just another girl who wasn't bad looking and could dance. If Rebecca gave me half a chance, I'd be as faithful and devoted to her as any man ever was to a woman. But I'm not a hermit. I like to read but not enough to spend all my evenings at home with a book."

Helm appeared to have run out of questions. He was rocking in that chair like an old woman at her knitting.

George found himself wondering why Jeannie Poole had been momentarily upset when she had heard that Helm was a detective. If not upset, then jarred, yet she was a stranger in town.

"Phone call, Mr. Helm." Mrs. Kinard's voice came from inside the house.

Helm rose. "Thanks for your cooperation, Dentz."

"I hope I told you enough to solve your case."

The sarcasm backfired. Helm said blankly, "Do you?" and went into the house.

Two words ending in a question mark to leave you up in the air and, if you were the killer, to put you into a sweat about how much he knew. A wise guy. A student of psychology. Nuts to him!

George went off the porch. In the cabin nearest the road a woman laughed with shrill gayety. That would be Jeannie Poole, in there with Mark for a hell of a lot longer than it would require him to hand her the towels and get her signature in the register. She laughed again. Mark was turning into quite a card with the women.

It was always Tony and then Mark, with himself bringing up the rear. If not with Rebecca, then with this woman.

On the way home he stopped off at Delmore's drugstore for a magazine. At least he would have something to read tonight.

6. Rebecca Sprague

THE pillow was thin and she could feel the gun through it. Rebecca had placed it there only because her father had insisted. She pushed the gun to the far side of the bed, but her restlessness remained. She could not sleep. Minutes became long hours.

There was a cricket under a window or perhaps right in the room. Somewhere in the house something creaked. The usual night sounds. No reason for any of them to frighten her. Only a couple of hours ago Ben Helm had told her that the killer would not come into the house after her. That scraping she was listening to now could be the branch of a tree rubbing against—

"Rebecca."

That was a voice whispering her name in a dream. A voice belonging to a shape in darkness, a shape with restless reaching hands.

"Rebecca."

Abruptly she was wide awake. She heard a panting breath and realized that it was her own.

"Who is it?" she whispered.

"Tony. I'm here at the window."

She turned her head on the pillow. The late moon had risen, its radiance flowing mellowly into the room. And she could see something solidly pale against a window screen and a tiny glow that would be a cigarette.

Her hand extended sideways to the gun. She recalled what Chief Cooperman had told her. "Don't forget that you can't shoot it when the safety catch is on." She snapped off the catch and slipped out of bed. Moving barefooted to the window, she felt suddenly ridiculous with the gun against her right hip.

Tony Bascomb stood among the Sweet William growing along the side of the house. This part of the house was almost at ground level. His head was only slightly lower than her own.

Moonlight touched the grin on his lean face. "Armed to the teeth, I see."

"I wasn't sure it was you," she said.

"You picked that gun up after I told you who I was."

"It could have been somebody else saying it was you."

Tony drew on the cigarette and the tip glowed, bringing his eyes out of shadow. They wore their lazy crinkled smile.

"Put something on and come out," he said.

Rebecca glanced down at her low-bodiced, semi-transparent nightgown. She moved away from him, laying the gun down on the dresser when she passed it, and took her blue crepe peignoir from the closed. Her father snored in his room across the hall. She put the robe on, softly closed her door, then returned barefoot to the window.

"Aren't you coming out?" Tony said.

"We can talk here."

"Afraid of me, sweetheart?"

She didn't know. She remembered the last time she had been with him and resentment flared in her.

"What do you want?" she said.

"To see you, of course. To find out what's going on. I phoned several times, but your father made it clear he doesn't care for me to come here." He mashed out his cigarette against the window ledge. "It appears that this is the only way I can get near you."

"You weren't anxious to come here when the door was wide open to you. And when I went to you Tuesday evening you threw me out of your house."

MOONLIGHT remained bright, but a cloud seemed to whip over his face. "I should have walked you home that night."

"Perhaps it was lucky for me you didn't."

"How's that?"

"He would have chosen another time and place, and Mr. Trumble wouldn't have come along to frighten him away." She found that her fingers were loosening and tightening the draw ribbon at the neck of her peignoir. "Now I'm on guard."

"How?" he said. "With that popgun?"

"Father hired a detective."

"A bodyguard?" Tony glanced along the side of the house. "He's no good if he doesn't know I'm here."

"He's not guarding me. He's trying to find out who killed Isabel."

"A shamus," Tony said distastefully. "Broken-down heels and grafters."

"Ben Helm isn't like that."

"They're all the same. If they weren't they wouldn't be in that crummy racket." His face moved closer to the screen. The mesh divided his features into tiny shadowy squares. "Come out, sweetheart."

"Don't call me sweetheart."

"Too affectionate?" he mocked.

"You don't feel affectionate and you don't say it affectionately. You make it sound tough."

"All right, darling, honey, baby, beloved. It's no fun standing here whispering with a screen between us. Come out."

The bow at her throat was choking her. She loosened it. "Two nights ago you wanted me to let you alone."

"Hell, Rebecca, I—"

He didn't finish it. He brought a match up to a fresh cigarette, and his shoulders as well as his face were scooped out of the semi-darkness. Tonight he was wearing a solid black bow tie. It made him look as carelessly young as in their remote high-school days—those bright, fresh days when he was her boy friend and she was his girl and there was no weariness, no despair, no terror.

"Afraid of me, Rebecca?"

She felt herself huddle in the robe. "I don't know. I'm just afraid."

"Of course," he said solemnly. "You haven't any idea who or why?"

"No."

"Did the cops dig anything up yet?"

A mist formed in front of her eyes, and all she could see of him now was the tip of his cigarette when it glowed. Her voice was tired in her throat. "You didn't come to see me," she said dully. "You came to find out if the police have learned anything."

"All right, put it that way. I'd hate to have anything happen to you."

"Would it matter a great deal to you?"

When the words were out she told herself that she shouldn't have uttered them. She was handing him her pride again, giving him an opening for a response that would bring her out of the house and into his arms.

"I've known you too long to want you harmed."

It was always like that. He drew her a little way to him and then rejected her.

She said listlessly, "I'm tired. I want to get back to bed."

"Okay, sweetheart. Keep that popgun of yours handy."

Suddenly there was only the moonlit night beyond the screen. She did not hear him move over the soft ground. The cricket chattered again, or more likely had not stopped.

"Tony," she called softly, leaning her cheek against the screen.

Only the cricket replied.

For a minute longer Rebecca stood at the window. She said his name again but only to herself. Then she dropped off her robe and crawled into bed.

7. Tony Bascomb

TONY and his mother were finishing lunch when Jeannie Poole arrived. Myra tried to be cordial but she couldn't quite hide her disapproval of Jeannie's purple linen suit, with lips and fingernails painted to match, and her sleekly lacquered face. Myra wouldn't have cared for any woman who wasn't Rebecca Sprague visiting her son. So Tony got Jeannie out of there in a hurry.

Cupping Jeannie's elbow, he led her down the porch steps and around the house to the meadow stretching back for a couple of hundred feet.

Rocks of every size and shape filled the meadow like pebbles scattered by a giant hand. You could walk only in a weaving track. Jeannie stumbled against him and stopped walking. "Where are you taking me?" she demanded.

"Where we can talk in private." He looked down at her red open-toed shoes with their three-inch tapering heels. "Didn't you know better than to wear shoes like that in the country?"

"Those are the lowest heels I have. You should have seen me try to walk in four-inch heels." She leaned cozily against him, her hand tucked through his arm. "Have you missed me, honey?"

Tony moved on without answering until they reached a huge black rock which completely blocked them out from his house and the others along that side of the road. Then he said, "Who brought you here?"

She turned, flinging one arm about his neck, and pulled his mouth down to hers. The kiss held for a long time until he broke it up.

"Um, good," she said, nestling against him. "It was worth the trip, honey."

"Who brought you here, Jeannie?" he asked again.

'Nobody. I came up alone last night by train. A pretty blond boy with a cute mustache gave me a lift. George something. He says he knows you. He has a swanky car."

"George Dentz."

"That's his name. He drove me to your house but you weren't in."

"I was out with my mother till late. Where did you stay?"

"There are some cabins down the road." Her purple mouth still close to his, turned up at the corners. "Say, you got cute looking men in this town. Those cabins are run by another man who says he knows you. Mark Kinard. Dark and handsome."

"You didn't come up here to look for handsome men."

"You're not handsome, honey, but I like your looks."

"It's after one now. You didn't seem

in a hurry to get here."

"I slept later than I intended. It was after eleven before I was dressed. I was hungry and I asked Mark where I could get a bite and he drove me to a drugstore and bought me some food. I hope you're jealous, honey."

"I'm not."

HER mouth went against his, softly, and he could feel the flutter of her lips as she spoke. "You crazy fool! What made you do it?"

He said against her mouth, "How did you know where I was?"

She slipped away from him. Pressing one hand against the curving rock for balance she removed a shoe. "You told me once about the town you came from. Remember?"

"No."

"Well, you did. I couldn't think of the name but you said it wasn't far upstate. I went to the telephone company and looked through directories beginning with Westchester county and worked my way up, calling all the Bascombs. I pretended I was making an advertising survey and asked the names of the men in the family. I hit a Tony Bascomb in Hessian Valley. I guess it was your mother I spoke to."

"Clever." He hunted in his pockets for cigarettes and discovered that he had left them at home. Jeannie didn't smoke. "How far behind you is Beau Bruff?"

She had put on her shoe after having shaken dust and pebbles out of it. Standing bent over to remove her second shoe she looked at him past her shoulder. The skin over her penciled eyebrows got taut.

"Do you imagine I'd tell him, honey?"

"I'm holding my imagination in check till I find out why you're here."

She stood erect. "Use your head. Beau's working hard to find you. I don't have to tell you he's smart. He'll figure there's a chance you're hiding out in your home town. How much investigation do you think it'll take for him to find out this is the place?"

"I'm not hiding."

"Then you ought to go if you had any sense."

"And you came here to warn me?" Tony grinned mockingly. "Sweetheart, I didn't suspect that you cared that much for me."

"Everything's a joke," she said bitterly. "And the one you pulled Monday isn't so funny. Everybody's laughing at Beau, even the cops. Beau's a good hater but he never hated anybody like he hates you."

"I don't care for him myself."

"Be a comedian," Jeannie said tiredly. "Stay in one place where he's sure to find you. The country's big and there are other countries. You can find plenty of holes to pull over your head."

"I've run as far as I intend to."

Her eyelids lowered against the sun at his back. Mascara glistened on the long black lashes. "I don't understand you, honey. Don't you want to live?"

"I think so."

"Then why be a sitting duck?"

He didn't answer that. He tore off a spear of wild grass and chewed it. "Why couldn't you have told me all this on the phone?"

"I wanted to see you once more, honey."

The setting was all wrong for her. The glaring sunlight made her narrow, high-cheeked, artificial face garish and slightly distasteful. Her upper lip bore a pearl mustache of sweat. She was at her second best in a smoke-clouded room with a band playing and liquor on the table, at her best with the lights out.

He said, "You didn't make it safer for me by coming here."

"Beau left yesterday for Pittsburgh and won't be back till tomorrow. He doesn't have to know a thing." She stepped from the rock and stood against him, her hands running along his sides to his armpits. Her voice got husky. "Honey, one more day together before you go looking for that hole."

He grinned down at her partly open mouth. "If I don't get a grip on myself I'll ask you to come to that hole with me."

"And I'll turn you down." Her head nestled against his shoulder. "You're poor and crazy and not dependable and you don't really care enough for me. But let's not brood about it. Kiss me."

SHE kissed him. It was good enough, Tony thought but didn't mean anything. All his mature life one woman had meant too much to him and all others not enough. He broke the kiss up before she wanted to.

"Let's go back," he said. "There's

a train to New York in forty minutes. You can just make it."

"I've got till tonight or even tomorrow morning."

"I'm driving you to the station right now."

Her eyes narrowed, showing exotically shadowed lids. "Just like that," she said, turning her shoulder.

When he closed a hand lightly over her upper arm she started to move, walking slowly and watching her shoes.

"Of course I'm grateful, Jeannie," he said.

"The hell with you," she said without heat, without anything in her voice.

Silently they walked to the sedan parked beside the cottage. As soon as she was in the car she opened her compact and got to work on her face. He stepped on the starter.

"Tony," Myra called.

He rolled the car forward, stopping it when it was beside the porch. Myra stood against the side rail.

"That man was here again only a minute ago," she said. "The same man who was here this morning when you were out. This time he told me his name —a Mr. Helm, a detective. I didn't know where you were, so he went away." His mother's mouth stretched with worry. "Tony, why don't the police let you alone?"

"I told you that lots of others in town are getting the same treatment. I'll be back soon."

He drove to the road. Jeannie concentrated on repairing her lips from the damage wrought by two kisses. Suddenly she looked up, leaning forward. "There's that detective now."

Tony saw a man walking along the left side of the road. He wore a light brown suit and a stiff-brimmed brown hat and a curved pipe was hooked between his teeth. He glanced up as the car passed.

"How do you know him?" Tony asked.

"He's staying in the same place I am. What's the pitch?"

"Last year a girl was murdered in this town."

"Where do you come in?"

"Everybody who knew her comes in, that's all."

"A girl friend of yours?"

"Stop heckling me. It's nothing to interest you."

Jeannie put away the lipstick and patted her cheeks with a powder puff. When he turned into the Kinard driveway, she put away her compact.

"I'll wait here while you check out," he said.

Only her head moved, twisting toward him. "You've got a nerve ordering me around. I'll stay as long as I please."

"Suit yourself."

"You're pretty sure I won't tell Beau you're here."

He sat sideways, his right elbow resting on the top of the seat. "Maybe you would," he drawled. "It would be like a woman to come up here to warn me and then tell Beau."

Her back was pushed into the angle where seat and door met. The tip of her tongue was visible between her sensuous lips. Her eyes lay flatly and blankly on him. "I could hate you, honey," she said. "I don't know why I give a damn for you."

"You don't very much."

"Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't." Her left hand moved along the top of the seat. Her purple-tipped fingers entwined with his. "I haven't had a bite to eat today except a skimpy late breakfast. Buy me a meal before I go."

Fair enough, he told himself. He could hardly do less for her. His free hand patted her knee. "I'll pick you up in a couple of hours."

"Why not now?"

"I have to shave and put on a tie and a jacket."

"Do you need a couple of hours for that?"

"Say an hour."

Jeannie got out of the car and turned. Her tongue ran over her lips, tasting the fresh layer of paint on them. "I ought to tell you to go to hell," she said reflectively. "Maybe I will when you come."

She walked off, leaving the car door open. Leaning sideways, he pulled the door to him, then turned the car on the flat grassy stretch fronting the cabins. She looked up as he circled her. He blew her a kiss.

The private sleuth named Helm was still plodding along the road. Tony whizzed by him.

He went directly up to his room and out of the trunk in the closet he dug out the Luger and the shoulder holster he had improvised yesterday morning out

of thin straps and a piece cut out of an old leather windbreaker. The heavy gun sagged under his armpit. He put on his poplin jacket and pulled up the zipper and appraised the result in the dresser mirror. There was no indication of the gun unless he raised his left arm high. He must remember to keep it down.

8. Mark Kinard

THE pay phone for the convenience of the guests was out in the hall. Mark Kinard was at the kitchen sink, taking a drink of water, when he heard somebody enter the house and then the *cling* of a coin dropping into a phone slot. The dial whirred three times, which meant a local call.

"Tony?" he heard Jeannie Poole say. "Who do you expect this to be? It's five and you said you'd be here before three. . . . I will not take a cab to the station. You promised that . . . Don't give me that. You're not so busy you can't at least spare the time to buy me a meal. . . . Listen. I came all the way up here to— . . . I don't believe a word you say. The hell with you. . . . Frankly, I no longer give a damn what happens to you."

The receiver snapped violently on the hook. Her heels clattered over the bare hall floor. The screen door opened and slammed.

Mark refilled the glass at the sink, and asked himself what Tony had. Why did two such completely opposite types as Rebecca and Jeannie go for him? Tony had always been successful with girls, even way back when as kids they'd first started to talk about girls with wistful yearning.

A horn honked. Mark went out and found a Buick sedan with a Vermont license. Two adults and three kids were in it. He put the two older children in one cabin and the parents and the little girl in another next to it. That meant he'd have to fetch in a cot for the girl. When the family drove off to the village to eat he went down to the basement for the cot.

Pa was talking to somebody in his workshop.

"You couldn't ask for a more devoted son," Pa was saying. "He's been working like a horse since I had my accident. He was only sixteen then."

"A boy that age should have been having fun." That was Ben Helm speaking.

"Fun, girls, going to parties." Pa cackled. "I raised plenty hell when I was sixteen. Mark wasn't like me. Serious, like he still is."

Mark felt a nerve throb in his cheek. He started toward the workshop, then checked himself.

"No girls either?" Ben Helm asked.

Pa was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "There's Rebecca Sprague, who's ruining his life. She's pretty all right but it's the pretty girls cause all the trouble."

"Mark seems partial to the Spragues. He was also interested in Isabel Sprague."

"Isabel?" Pa muttered. "Never heard of Mark and Isabel. Only Rebecca and she's ruining his life."

Mark walked noisily across the concrete floor to the three cots with mattresses folded inside them, piled on top of each other against a wall.

Ben Helm came out of the workshop. Holding a match to his pipe he watched Mark pull out the top cot. "Can I give you a hand?"

"No."

Mark carried the cot up the broad concrete steps leading out to the side of the house. He rested one end of the cot on the grass and turned his head. Helm had followed him.

"I don't mind you snooping," Mark said. "It's a dirty job but it's your job. Yesterday I told you I'd never had anything to do with Isabel Sprague. So you go down to my father, who'd rather talk than do anything else, and try to trap him into saying something to hurt his own son. How dirty do you have to get in your job?"

"Pretty dirty," Helm admitted amiably, "though I try to keep it reasonably clean. Where were you coming from the night you found Isabel Sprague's body?"

MARK wiped his sweaty hands on his white T-shirt and then saw that he had left two splotches on it. The detective, he told himself, was a fraud. He looked and spoke like a nice

guy. He wasn't. He could be more brutal with that gentle almost indifferent voice of his than a roomful of red-necked cops with rubber hoses.

"I don't mind your questions," Mark told him more quietly. "I realize I'm under suspicion as well as others but I've been answering the same questions over and over—last September by Cooperman and the district attorney, yesterday by you."

"Then why not answer this one?"

"Does it make me seem too cagey when I avoid your traps?" Mark said. You know I never said I was coming *from* anywhere that night. I was going *to* Bert Trumble's house. Bert's a friend of mine who got a job in Washington, D.C. He was visiting his folks for a few days, so I thought I'd go over and chew the fat."

"At ten-thirty at night?"

"That wasn't a late hour to visit another man."

"What were you doing before that, checking in tourists?"

"Nearly all guests check in before nine. That night my mother took care of any that came later. I was reading in my room."

"If you had nothing to do, why did you wait that late before starting out to visit Trumble?"

Mark smiled a little. "Now that's really a new question. The book bored me and I wasn't sleepy. I decided to go visiting."

"Why didn't you drive?"

"Because it was a fine night for walking."

"Uh-huh. Why didn't you walk by way of the road?"

"There's a footpath starting behind Cabin Seven. It runs through the woods and joins another path that leads up to where the Trumble's live. I told you about it last night. It's a short cut."

"I doubt it," Helm said. "I walked over it yesterday afternoon and again this morning. It's not enough shorter to be worth while; it's very steep in spots and occasionally almost overgrown. The road is a lot more comfortable."

"I enjoy walking through the woods," Mark said testily. "Is that a crime?"

"I'd probably prefer a path through the woods myself if I were mooning over a girl. So at ten-thirty that night you walked to Bert Trumble's house, which is next door to Rebecca Sprague.

"I told you Bert was my friend."

"And on the way to his house you'd pass Rebecca's house."

Mark dug a pack of cigarettes out of his white ducks. Helm struck a match, held it to the cigarette, then applied the flame to his pipe.

"Not bad, Mr. Helm," Mark said, drawing in smoke. "That's the new angle you thought up overnight. All right, you caught me. I confess. Let the whole town know I'm a moonstruck guy. They know it already."

"Was it important enough to cover up in your statement to the police?"

"Maybe it was. Tony had come back, the way he always came back sooner or later, which meant that I was again out of the picture. I mean with Rebecca, of course. The real reason I quit reading that night was that I couldn't keep my mind on anything but her. So I took a walk through the woods toward her house. Maybe she'd be alone on the terrace."

"And you never got to either house that night," Helm said.

"No. When I reached the spot where the path crosses Cream Brook I found Isabel."

"How close did you get to her?"

"Close enough to shine my flashlight down on her face. It looked awful. I could see her tongue."

HELM said, "Did you touch her?" her?"

"Only her hand. It was very cold. Then I ran like hell for Dr. Slesinger."

"Uh-huh." Helm's pipe bubbled as he drew on it. "Well, thanks," he said and walked off toward the road.

Mark hefted the cot to his shoulder. With a free hand he worked his handkerchief out of his hip pocket and mopped his brow.

"Mark, what's the next train to New York?"

That was Jeannie Poole's voice coming from the side blocked out by the cot on his shoulder. He turned enough to see her on the tiny roofless porch of her cabin. She sat on the metal armchair that was standard equipment in all twelve cabins.

"Seven-eighteen," he told her. "That's less than two hours. I'll drive you to the station at seven."

"That's sweet of you, Mark."

He carried the cot into Cabin Three.

As he eased it down to the floor he heard a car approach over the grass. More business. When they started coming in this early, it usually meant a full house by nine or even eight o'clock. He looked through the open door and saw that that car meant no money in his pocket. It was only George Dentz's gleaming convertible.

George rolled all the way up to Cabin One. Mark heard the car door slam and then he heard Jeannie say warmly, "Hello, there. I didn't think I'd see you again."

"I was on the way home from work and saw you," George said. "How long are you staying?"

Pushing the dresser over to one corner to permit wall space for the cot Mark gave a snorting laugh. George lived in the opposite direction. He'd have to go clear around the earth to pass here on the way home from work.

"I'm going back to New York in a little while," Jeannie Poole told him.

"That's too bad," George said.

Mark looked through the Venetian blind slats of the window on that side of the cabin but a corner of the cabin in between prevented him from seeing them on the porch. But he could hear them.

"I don't smoke, thanks," Jeannie Poole said. "But I could use the drink you asked me to have last night."

"Swell," George said.

"And before the train pulls in I could use a dinner to go with the drink." She uttered a soft, shy laugh that rang false. "Am I being too bold?"

"Not at all," George said. "I'm deeply flattered."

George had the right words, the right manner. He was probably giving her that wistful smile of his and running his thumbnail over his mustache.

"I'll be with you in a minute," she said.

Mark pushed the cot against the wall and opened it. Outside a horn honked. He went to the door and saw Bob Hutch's jalopy close to the house. Emily stuck her head out of an upstairs window and waved.

As Mark spread the sheet over the cot he thought of the phone call he'd overheard a while ago. Jeannie Poole was sore at Tony and was grabbing George on the rebound.

Damn it, why couldn't he have been the one? Why should Tony and George and Emily and everybody else have all the fun there was to be had?

"Mark," Jeannie Poole called.

He left the cabin. George was putting her bag into his car and in that silly hat with the purple grapes she was standing beside the car door.

Across the grassy stretch he saw his sister Emily getting into Bob Hutch's jalopy. She was wearing a green dress with an immense bow just above her behind—the party dress Ma had bought for her last week for twenty-three dollars and forty-five cents.

Jeannie Poole saw him. "Mark, I'd like to check out."

Mark moved toward her, thinking that everybody was going somewhere except himself.

9. Ben Helm

FROM the road Ben Helm saw a tall young man cutting the high grass in front of the house with a scythe. He didn't glance up as Ben came down the dirt driveway and then waded toward him through the waist-high grass. Keeping his right shoulder turned to Ben he worked his way on, leaving a wake of green and yellow matting over ragged stubble.

"You're a hard man to get to see," Ben said. "Last night you weren't home, but you knew that today I'd been here twice before this."

Tony Bascomb thrust the scythe away from him and started to flex his muscles but he quickly brought down his hands before they passed his shoulders.

"I never go looking for cops," he drawled. "I don't care for the atmosphere they create. I didn't kill Isabel and don't know who did. I wouldn't harm a hair of Rebecca's head as the saying goes. Does that answer everything you were going to ask?"

"I don't expect a confession at this point."

"From me?"

"From the killer, whoever he is," Ben said. "Are you on vacation from your job with Beau Bruff?"

Tony stood relaxed, watching Ben

run a wire cleaner through the shank of his pipe. He was overdressed for that kind of work on a hot day. Over a shirt he wore a poplin jacket zippered almost to the top and he was sweating profusely.

"A subtle character," Tony said. "A devious sleuth who sneaks up on the flank. What do you know about that job?"

"Hardly anything. But the New York police know a bit about you and they've told me something about Beau Bruff."

"Suppose you tell me. I'm particular about whom I work for."

"I don't mind being kidded if it amuses you," Ben said placidly. "Bruff is ostensibly an operator of a fleet of patched-up trucks. During the war he used some of them to haul black-market meat into the city. Now he's not above hijacking fur and cigarette trucks. Are you a man of all work for Bruff or do you have one particular job?"

"What's that got to do with the job Sprague hired you for?"

Sucking his pipe Ben looked him over. There was no tension in that long indolent body, no nervousness. The elliptical face was set in a permanently sardonic mold, as if everything were a slightly sour joke.

"I'd like to know what makes you tick," Ben said.

"That kind of cop, eh?" Tony sneered.

"Uh-huh. Cooperman gave me a lot of cut-and-dried stuff about you. Your father gave you an air rifle on your twelfth birthday. A couple of weeks later he died. You took that gun and shot out all the windows of a summer bungalow that was closed for the winter. Then you went down to the railroad station and shot out all the light bulbs."

"I was a wild kid. Anybody in town can tell you."

"That's what Cooperman says. But a kid that's been decently brought up doesn't run wild overnight for no reason. You started suddenly at twelve. A lot of small things after that until you and Mark Kinard broke into Delmore's drugstore."

Tony grinned crookedly. A grin, Ben thought, that would turn female hearts to mush. "That was what Mark had for having an evil companion. I talked him into it by holding up a vision of all the free ice cream we could hold. You make me feel nostalgic, shamus. When a guy starts to crowd thirty, he likes to recall the good old days as a kid."

"The good old days include being expelled from high school twice. Once for being caught shooting craps in the boys' toilet and once for stealing fountain pens out of desks."

"Don't give me too much credit. I only swiped one pen because somebody had stolen mine. But by that time I'd worked up a reputation, so nobody believed that I wasn't the master criminal."

"Your mother got you out of that, the way she got you out of everything else, beginning with the smashed windows. She wept and pleaded and because you were a local boy the police never jumped on you the way they would have if you'd been a slum kid. And she managed to get you reinstated in high school after each expulsion. It was convenient to have a mother, wasn't it?"

"Keep my mother out of this."

"Can she be kept out? Did you ever do anything to make her or anybody else happy?"

TONY'S grin tightened a little but that was all. "You know," he drawled, "I never yet met a cop who sooner or later didn't start lecturing."

"Why complain? You had a talent for getting a lecture instead of a jail term—even when you stole a car during your second year at college. You couldn't avoid being kicked out of school but the judge only handed you a lecture and a suspended sentence."

"He was a nice guy, that judge. Unlike the dean, he'd been young himself once. He understood I'd only borrowed the car because I had a date with a girl who liked to drive."

"Uh-huh. A schoolboy prank. Everything was a prank, then and later. Life was a prank."

"Shamus, you ought to be a preacher. Only you ought to develop more righteous indignation."

Ben understood now why Cooperman couldn't mention Tony Bascomb without growling like a dog who recognizes the scent of a mortal enemy. You had to have a pretty tough skin to keep him from getting under it, or professional detachment.

Ben said imperturbably, "That's what we have on your record up to the time

you enlisted in the army. There are probably a lot of other things that aren't known. Your army record wasn't bad. You rose to master sergeant in the infantry but of course that couldn't last. You were broken to buck private for insubordination."

"A fancy word meaning sassing superior officers. It made me a hero among the men."

"I don't suppose you resisted black-market activity when you were overseas?"

"You suppose right. The only difference between me and a million men and officers was that I devoted more energy to it than most. I would have cleaned up if I hadn't been in the army so long that I was shipped home just as the pickings were getting really good."

"You're versatile," Ben said. "Anything to make a dishonest penny. After you got out of the army you took a fling at the numbers racket in New York, working for Clip Barber. But it appears that you don't like to hang on to even those jobs for long."

"Clip was a heel and too greedy."

"So you went into business for yourself, running a crooked floating dice game with two other mugs. Your luck held. You happened not to be in the game that the police raided one night."

"I was in the hospital with the mumps, of all things." Tony started to pull down the zipper of his jacket, then yanked it up again though the sun blazed. "How long does this go on? I'd like to finish cutting the grass before dark."

"That's about all that's on the record. Currently you're working for Beau Bruff."

"I was. I quit early this week."

"Any particular reason?"

"I found that I don't like crooks."

"Not even yourself?"

Tony handed him that mocking thin-mouthed smile. "You tell me. When you find out what makes me tick let me know."

"Maybe you needed a father."

"Could be."

"Were you very fond of him?"

Tony glanced around as if to estimate how much grass he had to cut and how much was left. He said quietly, "My father was the swellest guy I ever knew. Always had time for me when he was home. Never too busy or tired to play ball with me or do all the things a kid likes to do with his old man.

"I don't remember that he ever hit me or even yelled at me. My mother was okay but my father . . ." He dug out cigarettes and brought his crooked grin back. "What the hell's that got to do with anything?"

"The day after he died you took that air rifle he gave you and shot out windows."

"I—" A muscle throbbed in Tony's thin cheek, but his twisted grin remained fixed. "Don't tell me that his death left a sort of scar on me that made me a bad boy?"

"You mean a trauma."

"I mean it's hogwash whatever you call it."

"Let's call it a sense of insecurity. At a most impressionable age you lost your father, who meant so much to you. Life did you dirt. You'd show it. You had to be a guy who didn't give a damn."

Tony uttered a dry, contemptuous laugh. "A shamus with fancy words. They're still hogwash. Guess again."

BEN said, "You made it hard for yourself when it could have been easy. You come from a good home in a good community. And you've got a swell girl like Rebecca Sprague in love with you."

Tony nodded affably. "I was wondering which flank you were creeping up with all this talk. It took you a long time to work up to Rebecca."

"Uh-huh. You're quite a man with the ladies, aren't you?"

"I do all right."

"You did all right with Isabel Sprague too."

"Isabel was a bit too young for me in those days."

"But not when you returned from overseas."

Tony fingered the zipper of his jacket as if deciding whether or not to let the air get to his chest. "Still on the flank, I see. Why don't you come right out with the question? Did I have a date to meet Isabel at Cream Brook the night she was murdered?"

"Did you?"

"The trouble with that question is that if I did have a date with her I'd lie to you—and if I said I didn't have a date with her, you wouldn't believe me. No point in asking or answering."

"How about dates with Isabel before that?"

"That question is in the same category. No comment as the politicians who don't want to go out on a limb say."

"Uh-huh. Why did you leave Rebecca so early the night Isabel was murdered?"

"I'd made up my mind to drive down to New York that night. I didn't want to start too late."

"You could have explained that to her instead of walking out on her."

"That's the way I do things."

"No," Ben said. "You're enough of a heel without pretending that you're worse. You left Rebecca so early that night for one of two reasons. You either had a date with Isabel or you were running away from Rebecca."

For an instant Tony's poise was shattered. He brought the pieces together with a derisive grin. "Now there's a sleuth for you. Sees all, knows all."

"Rebecca believes that you ran away from her. That you've spent a good part of your adult life running away from her."

"She told you that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why the hell—" Tony said and stopped as if those three words completely covered the subject. He bent over and came up with the scythe. "I've got work to do."

"Go ahead," Ben said. "I'll watch."

Tony leaned on the scythe. "Shamus, you distract me."

"Afraid you wouldn't be able to keep your right side to me all the time?" Ben stepped forward and slipped a hand under Tony's left shoulder.

Tony's torso jerked, then relaxed.

Ben withdrew his hand and used it to take the pipe out of his mouth. "A big gun," he said. "A Luger."

"Shamus, you amaze me. You feel a gun through a jacket and know the make."

"Rebecca told me that you have a Luger. Isn't it a bit uncomfortable wearing a heavy gun while cutting grass?"

"It's the only one I've got. A war souvenir, which makes it legal to own."

"Who's scaring you?" Ben asked.

"There's a remote chance I'll catch sight of the lad who put his hands on Rebecca Tuesday night. I'd enjoy putting lead into him."

"Do you know who he is?"

"No idea. If you find out I'll be grateful if you'll let me know." Tony set to work in earnest with the scythe.

FOR a long moment Ben watched him silently. Tony had lost the loose-jointed rhythm of his swing. Toward the end of each stroke he tended to jab at the grass.

"You're not as tough as you'd like to be," Ben observed.

"I do my best."

"Uh-huh. Well, so long."

Tony Bascomb didn't glance up.

Ben followed the swath of cut grass to the driveway and then turned right toward the road. Jay Sprague had offered to get him a car while he was on the case, but Ben preferred these walks. He seldom had more than a mile or two to go in any direction and his mind worked best while he walked. Only not well enough. He was hot in too-heavy clothes. He was suddenly mentally tired, oppressed with a sense of being on a treadmill, doing a lot of moving without getting anywhere.

He walked all the way to the village and ate in Delmore's drugstore—the food was too flimsy but better than the greasy dishes thrown at you in the roadside lunchwagon. He returned to Kinard's in gathering twilight.

In his cabin he removed his shoes and jacket and shirt and wrote a letter to his wife. He wrote for a solid hour because that was the only way he could be close to her over three thousand miles.

When he finished the letter he went out to the tiny open porch and sat with his pipe in the metal armchair. There was thinking to be done about murder and attempted murder and what made people do the things they did. But he thought instead of Greta whom he hungered to have here with him now, this moment, to hear the husky music of her voice, to taste the headiness of her mouth, to feel the first softness of her in his arms.

A convertible pulled in from the road and stopped on the driveway. He saw the red-headed girl in the hat with the purple grapes get out. George Dentz got out too and she took her bag from his hand. He said something to her. She

laughed and shook her head and patted his face and walked toward the house. She walked unsteadily because of her spike-heeled shoes.

Before she reached the house Mrs. Kinard came out. The redhead spoke to Mrs. Kinard and then she turned and said, loudly enough for Ben to hear, "It's okay, George. Thanks for everything." George Dentz got into his car and turned on the lawn and drove off.

Mrs. Kinard returned into the house, leaving the redhead alone. In the full glare of the floodlights she stood resting her weight on one hip, her back to Ben. After a minute Mrs. Kinard came out, carrying a towel and the guest register. Together the two women walked across the grass. The redhead waddled a bit because of the stilts she wore for shoes.

Last night she had had the cabin nearest the road but now Mrs. Kinard led her to one at the other end of the semicircle. The light went on.

It was very quiet. There were only a couple of lights on, in the house and only three of the cabins, including the redhead's, showed light. Most of the guests were asleep but by the number of cars Ben could tell that hardly more than half the cabins were occupied. Business hadn't been better last night.

Ben found that he was yawning. Mrs. Kinard was coming out of the redhead's cabin. His watch said twenty after ten. Too early to go to sleep but there was no reason to stay up. Five minutes later he was in bed.

"Helm!"

His eyes opened. Daylight poured in through the Venetian blind slats. Chief Cooperman stood beside his bed.

10. George Dentz

FROM the bathroom window George Dentz saw the dark-green sedan, with STATE POLICE in large white block letters on the door, roll up the driveway. Reagan got out.

George turned off the hot water tap and went downstairs drying his hands. At eight o'clock on Saturday morning his aunt and uncle still slept. He got the front door open before Reagan's thick finger could press the bell button.

"Good morning," George said.

The state trooper said crisply, "Do you know a woman named Jean Poole?"

"Slightly." Dew glittered like numberless gems on the smooth lawn. It was going to be a scorching day. "Last night I took her to dinner at Black Rock Inn," George said. "She told me she was leaving for New York this morning."

"She's not going anywhere. She's dead."

For a moment George's voice was locked in his throat. When he forced it past, it quivered only a little. "How did she die?"

"She died from a pair of hands wrapped around her throat. Near the Kinard place. That's where we're going."

On the way there George could get no more information out of Reagan. He was taking George to the big shots who would do a job on him.

Half a dozen cars were parked in

[*Turn page*]

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the Kinard driveway. The four Kinards were assembled at the side of the house. Mr. Kinard sat in an Adirondack chair, his crutches resting against the slatted back. Mrs. Kinard and Emily occupied a backless wooden bench. Mark stood. All their heads turned to watch the state police car pull up.

"Wait here a minute," Reagan told George. He moved to the house with the wide-stiff gait of a trooper. When Reagan was out of sight George left the car and started toward the Kinards. Mark met him halfway.

"This is a hell of a note," George said.

"It sure is." Mark wiped his brow with his palm though he looked cool in what amounted to his warm weather uniform—white ducks and a white tight T-shirt showing off his deep chest.

"They've got Tony in the house now. I had quite a session with them a while ago. Where was I last night and all that. A million questions. They've had the rest of my family on the grill too."

Through the open windows of the house flowed a mutter of voices. George concentrated on them but he was too far off to pick out words.

"Where did it happen?" George asked.

"You know where the footpath comes out a couple of hundred feet up the road?"

"Yes."

"That's where." Mark dropped his cigarette butt and his toes ground it into the sod. "They made me look at her body. To identify her, they said. It was quite a—a shock."

"She must have left her cabin after I brought her back last night."

"I wouldn't know," Mark said. "At nine-thirty I was up in my room. I'd done a hard day's work and on top of that I was disgusted because we hadn't done the business we should have. My mother handled the late comers. I read for an hour and went to bed."

Abruptly Mr. Kinard's voice burst out, "I'm telling you, Emily, there's a madman around who likes to choke girls. You're not to go out with anybody. You hear me?"

"Pa, the whole town can hear you," Emily said.

"Let 'em hear! A crazy killer is going around choking pretty girls. First Isabel Sprague. Then Rebecca Sprague. Then—"

"Allan, haven't we gone through enough this morning?" Mrs. Kinard said tiredly. "It's not Emily's fault."

"Who says it's her fault? I'm warning her, that's all." Mr. Kinard subsided in the Adirondack chair, growling inaudible words.

Reagan came out of the house. His stride quickened when he saw George and Mark together. "You come with me, Mr. Dentz," he said and led George up to the porch. "You wait here till they're ready for you."

In the house George heard Chief Cooperman bark, "I'm sick and tired of your insolence!" and Tony reply lazily, "In your book anybody who refuses to be intimidated by you is insolent."

The voices were in the living room, which had two open windows fronting the porch. George sat in the wicker rocker and crossed his legs. Reagan returned to his car to make a call on his two-way radio. George wondered if it was police technique to have those about to be questioned listen in on somebody else getting the works so that taut nerves would become frayed. Or perhaps Reagan, who wasn't too bright, had no business leaving him here to get an earful.

A VOICE George recognized as belonging to District Attorney Prince was speaking. He'd been questioned last September by Prince in connection with Isabel Sprague's death.

"We don't dispute that you drove Jean Poole here from your house early yesterday afternoon. Helm saw you. What I want to know is when you saw her after that."

"How many times do I have to tell you before it sinks in?" Tony drawled. "I didn't see her again."

"Where were you last night?"

"At home, listening to the same ball game I told you a few minutes ago I listened to. If you want more details, the Giants played the Phillies. The score was knotted at five each till the last half of the seventh, then Mize sent Lockman home with a double. Then I went to bed."

"At what time?"

"I didn't notice. After twelve, I guess."

"You were alone in the house?"

"My mother was there. She was lis-

tening to the living room radio and I was listening to the kitchen radio. She doesn't care for baseball and I don't care for her heart-rending dramas."

"Did she stay up as long as you did?"

"She went up to bed at about eleven and I shifted to the living room radio."

"So you have no alibi after eleven o'clock last night?"

"I've no alibi for lots of things that happen. Has anybody in this room?"

There was a brief silence. Then District Attorney Prince said, "So you contend that you preferred to listen to a ball game to being with Jean Poole?"

"Jeannie bored me. Baseball doesn't."

"You couldn't have been bored with her if you had her come up from New York."

"I didn't want her and I didn't expect her. You can ask George Dentz. He gave her a lift to my house Thursday night and I wasn't home. That shows I didn't expect her."

"Who is Jean Poole?" the district attorney snapped.

"Somebody I knew in New York."

"What's her address?"

"Didn't you find anything in her handbag?" Tony said lazily.

"I'm asking the questions. Where did she live?"

"Somewhere in New York, I suppose."

"You knew her well enough for her to come all the way to Hessian Valley to see you, but you don't know her address."

"I was never in her home."

"Did she live at seven thirty-two West Seventy-ninth Street?"

"I wouldn't know."

"In her handbag we found a letter addressed to her at seven thirty-two West Seventy-ninth Street."

"Then why ask me?"

Chief Cooperman came in at that. "Damn it, I don't like your attitude, Bascomb! This is murder. You ran away when Isabel Sprague was murdered and there was nothing I could do to you when I caught up with you in New York. You're not going to run away now. We got the goods on you. You're the only one she knew in Hessian Valley."

"So what?"

IN THE house somebody sighed. George supposed that it was the district attorney because it was his voice that he heard next. "I want you to tell me, Bascomb, everything you know about Jean Poole."

"I met her a couple of months ago in New York. In a night club. Picked her up."

"And you weren't gentleman enough to take her to her home?"

"I was gentleman enough to take her to *my* home. I saw her a few more times after that but I always met her somewhere or she came to my place and she always preferred to go home alone. Probably she was married, though I didn't ask her and she didn't tell me. Last time I was with her I happened to mention that I was going to visit my mother in Hessian Valley. That's how she knew where to find me."

"So her burning passion for you brought her to Hessian Valley, is that it?" Prince said, sarcastically.

"She seemed to like me."

"But you didn't like her?"

"Not in Hessian Valley."

Cooperman said, "So you choked her."

"That would be a crude way of getting her out of my hair. Besides, I'd assumed she'd gone back to New York."

"Why didn't she?" Prince asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

Reagan had returned from his car and was now sitting on the porch steps.

"Helm, is there anything you'd like to ask him?" Prince was saying.

"I think we're wasting our time," Helm replied. "It's obvious that Bascomb is set on giving us wisecracks instead of information."

"That's what he thinks," Prince snapped. "I can make it mighty tough for you, Bascomb."

"I don't see how," Tony drawled. "I'm answering all the questions thrown at me. I can't help it if you don't like the answers."

There was a mumbling of men consulting in undertones. Then footsteps sounded on the bare hall floor and Tony came out on the porch with Chief Cooperman. Reagan rose to his feet.

"You wait here, Bascomb," Cooperman said. He crooked a finger. "All right, Mr. Dentz."

"They're a tough bunch, George," Tony said affably as George rose from the rocker. "Don't let them throw you."

George followed Cooperman into the house and found them all lounging in

the living room as if at a party. Helm sat or the couch beside the police sergeant, who hadn't said a word while Tony was being questioned. A man in civilian clothes sat at a table with a stenography notebook at his elbow.

The wing chair was occupied by District Attorney Prince, who was no older than George. He was negligently clad in a green sport jacket over an open-necked green sport shirt. He rose, shook George's hand, waved to an armless upholstered chair.

It was all very amiable. Nobody shouted at him. Nobody accused him of anything. In response to a single question from Prince he told how he had given a lift to Jeannie Poole Thursday evening and had driven her to Tony Bascomb's house and then to Kinard's cabins.

"Did you become friendly with Jean Poole at the time?" Prince asked.

George watched the stenographer's pencil poise over the pad. "Well, I asked her if she'd go with me for a drink. She turned me down. Said she was tired and wanted to go to bed. When we got here Mr. Helm wanted to have a talk with me and Mark Kinard showed her to a cabin. That's the last I saw of her that night."

HELM took his pipe out of his mouth and spoke. "The fact that you asked her to go for a drink indicated that you liked her."

"I hardly knew her. We hadn't been together more than ten minutes."

"But you wanted to get to know her better?" Helm persisted.

"I had nothing else to do that night."

"And then, when you and I were talking on the porch, you resented the fact that Mark Kinard was spending considerable time with her in her cabin."

George felt his thumb stroke his mustache. He dropped his hand to his knee. "Resented?"

"I think that's the word," Helm said. "You kept glancing at her cabin."

"I wasn't particularly resentful. I told you I hardly knew her."

District Attorney Prince took over. "Yet next day you called on her here."

"I wouldn't put it that way. I'd just left the lumber yard, through for the day. When I passed in my car I saw her sitting on the porch of her cabin. I stopped off."

"Wait a minute." Chief Cooperman hitched up his cartridge belt as if its weight were too much for his slight frame. "You wouldn't drive this way on your way home from work."

"I didn't say I was on my way home. I was bound for the Sprague house to discuss some business matters that had come up during the day."

"Did you?" Prince asked.

"I never got there. Jeannie Poole asked me to take her to dinner and then drive her to the station."

"Which train did she plan to make?"

"The seven-eighteen from Hessian Valley."

"Go on," Prince said, settling back in the wing chair. "You took her out to dinner. Where?"

"Black Rock Inn. It was crowded and service was slow and all of a sudden I realized that it was after seven. I told Jeannie that she couldn't make the train and that it was the last one to New York till next morning."

Cooperman snorted. "No wonder she missed the train. Black Rock Inn is fourteen miles from the station."

"Do you know of a decent restaurant that's nearer?" George retorted.

"That's not the point," Prince said. "Certainly you should have been aware of the passage of time."

"She was such pleasant company that time passed quickly," George said flippantly. The instant the words were out he regretted them because they were exactly like the ones Tony would have used. And they left an opening for Prince to pounce.

"Are you sure you didn't find her such pleasant company that you wanted her to miss the train?"

"I admit that I wasn't exactly sorry that we didn't have to rush the meal."

"Where did you go from Black Rock Inn?"

"We stayed there quite a while. There's a juke box and she was a pretty good dancer. Incidentally, they know me at Black Rock Inn. Gilbson, the manager, saw us there till we left."

"When did you leave?"

"Not much after nine-thirty. Jeannie was afraid that if she didn't get back to Kinard's early enough all the cabins would be taken for the night."

"Was she upset because she had missed the last train?"

"Not very. But she was anxious to

take the first train out next morning. I told her there was a seven-five, and she hoped she'd get up early enough to make it."

"What did she tell you about herself while you were with her?"

"She steered clear of that subject. Maybe that's the wrong way to put it. She merely didn't talk about herself."

"Did she talk about Tony Bascomb?"

GEORGE reached sideways to crush out his cigarette in an ashtray. He felt five pairs of eyes batter at him. "She wanted to know if he had a girl friend in Hessian Valley. I didn't care to discuss the subject, so I changed it."

Prince nodded. No doubt he had been fully informed about Rebecca Sprague and her suitors.

"Weren't you anxious to spend more time last night with Jean Poole than you did?"

"Eager? Maybe I would have liked to but she said she had to get to bed early if she wanted to be up in time to make the seven-five."

"Did you offer to drive her to the station next morning?"

"No. I had no desire to get up at six o'clock to chauffeur her for a couple of minutes."

"Did she ask you?"

"No."

"How did she plan to get to the station?"

"I left that up to her. She knew how to get herself taken places. She wasn't shy."

Ben Helm said, "Did she make a phone call while she was at the inn with you?"

"She didn't—" George hesitated. "She could have without me knowing. The ladies' room is around an L and there's a phone booth next to it. She was gone twice, once for quite a while. But you know how women are. She might have made a phone call but I wouldn't know."

"The time she was gone quite awhile, was that after she knew she'd missed the train?"

"Yes. We'd just finished a dance and were through with the meal."

"At what time?"

"Around eight-thirty but it could have been earlier or later."

Helm drew on his pipe. Prince looked at him and nodded as if to himself, then turned back to George.

"What time did you return to these cabins with her?" Prince asked.

"Ten o'clock."

"Mrs. Kinard says it was a quarter after ten."

"Was it? I didn't pay attention to the time."

"What did you do after she left your car?"

"I waited until Mrs. Kinard came out. When I heard Mrs. Kinard tell her that she had a cabin I drove away."

"You mean you went home?"

"No. I drove for a couple of hours."

"Drove where?"

"Nowhere in particular. I have a new car. I like to drive. And I had things on my mind."

"Jean Poole?"

"Deliberately George looked at Helm, then at Cooperman, then at Prince. "Rebecca Sprague. She's been on my mind for a long time."

"I see," Prince said. "Where did you drive?"

"Over to the Taconic and down as far as Croton Dam. I returned home at midnight more or less. I went straight up to bed." George removed his thumb from his mustache, annoyed that automatically he had been stroking it. "My aunt and uncle were asleep. I doubt if they heard me come in."

They were finished with him then. The district attorney thanked him and Cooperman accompanied him out to the porch. Tony was placidly rocking in the wicker rocker.

"You two come with me," Cooperman ordered.

By the time they had descended the porch steps the state police sergeant had joined them. The four men cut across the lawn. Only Emily and Mr. Kinard still sat at the side of the house. Mark and Mrs. Kinard had probably gone about their work, which had to be done, murder or no murder. When they reached the road Cooperman stepped between George and Tony with the sergeant leading the way. Nobody said anything. Realizing where they were going, George felt his diaphragm contract.

Several hundred feet beyond the cabins three cars were parked in a line on the grassy fringe past the shoulder of the road. Beyond the grass the woods started sparsely with trimmed birches and then ran into bigger stuff. A state

trooper and two men in plainclothes were there. George hardly glanced at them. While still walking, his eyes had found the canvas sheet spread over the grass. There was something under the sheet.

"All through, Doc?" Cooperman asked.

ABURLY, bald man nodded. "All that I can accomplish here, which is little enough. The lab boys are also finished."

Cooperman bent from his hips, gripped an edge of the canvas sheet, whipped it completely away. And there lay Jeannie Poole, staring up at the clear blue sky. In death the painted face was hideously garish.

George turned his head away and found himself looking at Tony, whose thin face was suddenly colorless. Tony had no wisecracks now, no mocking smile.

"George Dentz, can you identify this woman?" Chief Cooperman was saying.

George looked at her again. If you avoided the face the rest of her was merely pathetic in that crumpled linen suit and the sagging stockings. One of her open-toed spike-heeled shoes was attached to the foot only at the toes. Her left shoe was missing.

Cooperman repeated the question. George raised his eyes and saw that every man but Tony was watching him intently. They didn't need him to identify her. He knew that he and Tony had been brought here so that their reactions could be observed when they saw the dead woman. A murderer might break at this point.

"She's Jeannie Poole," George muttered.

Cooperman put the same question to Tony.

"Jeannie Poole," Tony said and stuck a cigarette between his tight lips. He didn't light it. "Was she found in this position?"

Cooperman hesitated before replying, then evidently decided that the answer wouldn't give anything away. "Face down. All in a heap." He started to replace the canvas sheet.

"Where's her other shoe?" Tony asked.

Cooperman paused with the sheet covering only the face and looked up over his shoulder. For what seemed a very long time he studied Tony's face. Impassively Tony met his gaze. Then, without replying, Cooperman spread the sheet over the rest of the body.

"Okay, Doc," he said. "She's ready for your knife and saw."

"About time. The sun's getting hot."

George felt his stomach twist.

They were moving again, he and Tony and Cooperman and the sergeant, who did not appear to have the power of speech. They headed away from the cabins, but only for a short distance, then Cooperman turned up a path running into the woods. They had to walk in single file now, Cooperman first, then Tony, then George, then the sergeant.

They approached a fork. The right fork ran past Cream Brook and up to Digby Hill where the Spragues lived. George couldn't keep his stomach from heaving. Were they being taken to where Isabel Sprague's body had been found months ago? Had the police managed to tie up the two murders?

Cooperman turned left at the fork, onto the narrower path swinging around toward the rear of the Kinard place. George wiped his mouth with his index finger.

Cooperman stopped. "Here's where Jean Poole's other shoe was found."

The two cops looked at George and Tony, watching every facial nerve and muscle, watching their eyes, their mouths.

"That means she came this way," Tony said gravely. "And that she didn't walk."

Cooperman hadn't any comment. He resumed walking and the others spread out behind him.

The rear of a cabin appeared. Past it George saw the Kinard house. They were about at the middle cabin. Cooperman turned right, moved along the backs of the cabins and then out between two of them. Cooperman led them to the porch of the second cabin from the far end. It had an 11 over the door.

"Was this her cabin?" George asked. He heard his voice curiously hoarse.

"Don't you know?" Cooperman said.

"Yesterday she had the last cabin at the other end. I guess that one was taken when she came back."

Cooperman opened the door and they followed him inside. The bed was made. Her bag was on the floor, her handbag

and hat on the chest of drawers. Otherwise it didn't look as if anybody had occupied it.

"So she never went to bed," Tony muttered.

"She was choked to death before she had a chance to," Cooperman said brutally, splitting his gaze between Tony and George.

He and the speechless sergeant were still looking for something in their faces, for a sign, a hint, hoping that one of them would go to pieces as they backtracked over the murder. George wondered if he succeeded in keeping his own face as empty as Tony's.

11. Ben Helm

CHIEF Cooperman's office was a cubby hole between the tax assessor's office and the town clerk's office. District Attorney Prince, as befitted his rank of a county official, occupied the one comfortable chair, the swivel chair behind the desk. The police chief, his bony hands stuck under his cartridge belt, tilted back against the wall in a straight-backed wooden chair. Ben Helm stood at the window.

"I guess it'll have to do," Prince said into the crackling phone. "Thanks, Doc." He hung up and told the others: "Dr. Styles says she probably wasn't alive after midnight. Knowing when she ate her last meal helped somewhat to determine the time of death. Mrs. Kinard says that all the cabin lights were out when she turned off the floodlights and went to bed at a quarter to twelve. I think we can assume that Jean Poole was dead by then."

"I bet he didn't carry her out of there till the floodlights were out," Cooperman said.

"Almost certainly he didn't." Cooperman opened a second button of his green sport shirt, revealing curly blond hair on his chest. "Let's see where we stand. When Jean Poole returned to the cabins last night she was given a different cabin by Mrs. Kinard — Cabin Eleven instead of Cabin One. Only two people, as far as we know, were aware of the change—Mrs. Kinard and George Dentz."

"Don't forget Mr. Kinard," Cooperman said. "He went to bed at ten but he admits he was still awake and through a window saw Jean Poole and his wife go into Cabin Eleven. Sure he's a cripple but he gets around on crutches and cripples are pretty strong."

Cooperman nodded. "He must be considered. Then there's Mark Kinard, who says he was in his room, which faces away from the cabin. But we've only his word for it. As for Tony Bascomb, she could have phoned him from Black Rock Inn to tell him that she had missed the train. She planned to take the seven-five next morning.

"How did she intend to get to the station? She didn't ask Dentz. Perhaps she didn't because she had already asked Bascomb over the phone. So he knew she was returning to the cabins that night and was waiting for her when she arrived with Dentz and saw which cabin Mrs. Kinard assigned her to. Helm, didn't you have that idea when you asked Dentz if she had made a phone call from Black Rock Inn?"

"Uh-huh," Ben said. "But all that tells us is she could have phoned Bascomb. We don't know that she did."

"At any rate it's possible that each of these people knew that she was in Cabin Eleven," Prince went on. "We can be sure that she didn't leave the cabin under her own power. She certainly wouldn't have walked through the woods in those four-inch heels when, as we found, she had shoes with lower and more comfortable heels in the cabin. And there is the fact that on the way she lost a shoe. She was carried out, dead, by whoever strangled her in the cabin."

"It was somebody she wasn't scared of," Cooperman observed. "If she'd cried out people in the other cabins would've heard."

"Precisely. The killer entered while the floodlights were still on and she received him without fear. Strong fingers were clamped about her throat so that she was incapable of uttering sound or even struggling."

"Like Isabel Sprague," Cooperman said.

Prince smiled. "Which brings us to the reason why he did not simply leave her body in the cabin. He was afraid that he might have been seen slipping into her cabin. In addition he realized

that the suspects would be limited to the few people she knew in Hessian Valley.

"But if she were found dead by the side of the road, anybody could have murdered her. A stranger. A passerby. A tramp. As was at first believed in the murder of Isabel Sprague. So he turned the cabin light out and waited there in darkness until Mrs. Kinard had turned off the flood lights.

"Then, under cover of the night, he carried the body along the footpath. Because of the darkness he didn't notice her shoe fall off on the way." He turned his head. "Have you anything to contribute, Helm?"

BEN stepped from the window to knock out his pipe in the generous metal ashtray on the desk. "Batting around possibilities is a pleasant mental game. I've a few pet ideas, but there's not enough to back them up. We need certainties. Otherwise we'll always find ourselves catching our tails. We aren't certain that it wasn't a guest from another cabin who visited Jean Poole in the hope of spending an entertaining evening. We're not certain that she did or didn't make a phone call and, if she did, that it wasn't to somebody besides Tony Bascomb. We're not even certain that it wasn't a petty thief who sneaked into a cabin to rob whoever was in it and strangled her before she could yell."

"In short," Prince said sourly, "anybody at all."

"Possibly, but probably our limited area of suspects. We're dealing with somebody who used his hands on three different women with intent to kill and killed twice. The odds say it's the same man because—"

The ringing of the phone interrupted him. Cooperman rose from his chair to answer it. He listened, lifted his head, said to the two men, "New York police," then crouched over the phone as if afraid that it would get away from him.

"Well, what d'you know!" he exclaimed when he hung up. "It turns out that Jean Poole was Beau Bruff's girl friend."

"Who's he?" Prince asked unexcitedly.

Ben said, "A racketeer. Tony Bascomb was working for him though he told me he'd quit recently."

"Maybe he did and maybe he didn't," Cooperman said. "But she was Bruff's girl and she came up here to see Tony."

"So?" Prince turned in his chair to face Ben. "Somehow Bruff found out that she had come up here and why. He followed her. He found out that she was staying at Kinard's cabins. He hid there, waiting for her. Shortly after she returned with Dentz, Bruff slipped into her cabin and strangled her. How do you like it, Helm?"

"Not much. Why would Bruff go to all the bother and risk of carrying her body out of the cabin? It would have made no difference to him to have her body found there."

"Besides," Cooperman put in, "this Bruff has a good alibi. The New York police went to his office where he runs his shady trucking business. Seems Bruff has been in Pittsburgh since Thursday, they expect him back any minute by plane." He smirked. "Guess this Jean Poole ran up here while he was out of town."

Prince sank back in the chair and expelled breath through his mouth. "As you say, Helm, this is merely an intellectual game we're playing until we get our teeth into something."

"It's not a game to Tony Bascomb," Ben said. "He's in danger."

"From Bruff?" Prince studied his fingernails. "I see. When Bruff returns to New York, he'll be told that Jean Poole was murdered in Hessian Valley. That will tell him that there had been an affair between her and Tony Bascomb. You say Bruff is a bad customer?"

"That's his reputation."

"Why should we worry?" Cooperman growled. "Let those gangsters kill each other off. Best thing they can do for society."

"In your town, Chief?" Ben said.

Cooperman pushed out his lower lip. "I'll kick Tony out of town. I warned him to keep out."

"Unfortunately," Prince said, smiling faintly, "he's required to remain here as a key witness."

Ben threw one thigh over a corner of the desk and picked up the phone. "Chief, do you know Bascomb's number?"

"You going to warn him?"

"Uh-huh."

"Three four one," Cooperman grumbled.

Ben dialed. He listened to half a dozen rings before he hung up. "No answer."

Prince spread his hands. "I expected that. Bascomb has already left Hessian Valley. He withheld Jean Poole's identity from us in order to give himself a start over Bruff. What do we do now? Go after him because he's a key witness who's run away?"

Ben returned to the window. Loading his pipe, he looked at the quiet street.

12. Rebecca Sprague

LAST year the borders of portulacas on either side of the flagstone walk hadn't done at all well. The brittle soil Rebecca rubbed between her fingers had too much clay in it. Probably that was the trouble but she would try portulacas again.

Mike Faye turned up the portable radio louder. He was stretched out on the terrace chaise longue, listening to the horse races. All he required to complete the picture of indolence was a tall glass in his hand. He was one of her father's truck drivers, set to guard her while her father had gone to see Helm and the police about last night's horror. Mike's rugged face was amiable but his rugged bulk could frighten off a horde of stranglers.

Strangler! You could try to dismiss from your mind the word, the deed, the terror. And with the passing of days the memory of a faceless form in the night and frenzied fingers on the back of your neck had begun to take on the remoteness of a nightmare from which there was a slow awakening. But last night the strangler's restless hands had closed on another throat and the terrible reality of his menace had returned like an engulfing wave.

This morning the police had been here—Ben Helm and Chief Cooperman and District Attorney Prince. They had told her and her father of a strange woman choked to death last night. They had asked her if she had ever seen that woman, had ever heard of her, as if her acquaintance with her could have been cause for murder.

One of Tony's women.

Abruptly Mike stood up. "Who's that?" he demanded.

Twisting her head Rebecca saw Tony approach the house from the road. "Hi, sweetheart," he called.

Rebecca rose. As she brushed dirt from her bare knees and fingers she felt a swelling in her breasts, a tightness in her throat. "It's all right, Mike," she said.

In a rather heavy corduroy jacket Tony looked uncomfortably warm. His shaded eyes looked her over languidly, from trim ankles to the broad white ribbon that gathered her brown hair loosely behind her head. Her white shorts and tight white jersey contrasted richly with her smooth tanned bare arms and legs.

"You're what disturbs a man's sleep," he commented.

"I've never disturbed yours," she said tartly.

"Think so?" He glanced at Mike and took her arm. "Where can we talk without an audience?"

She led him off the walk and across the lawn to the side of the house. Mike looked after them and when he saw them stop within his sight he resumed his seat.

Tony sank down on the grass and reached up for her hand and tugged gently. "Sit here."

She sat but not close to him.

"Why did you come?" she said angrily. "Because the woman you brought up from New York is dead and you have nothing else to do?"

Tony stretched his long legs, propping his head up on an elbow. The sun beat down. In the very little she wore she was hot. Tony sweltered in his jacket and didn't remove it.

"Jeannie Poole was a woman I knew in the city," he told her. "There was nothing serious between us. I've never pretended to be an angel. About lots of things, including women. Jeannie was one of the women. I didn't bring her up here. I was sore when she came, even though it was chiefly about—well, business. I'd worked for the guy she lived with."

REBECCA said woodenly, "I'm not so important to you that it should matter."

"It does matter." His tone was star-

tlingly harsh. "I wouldn't bring any woman to Hessian Valley. I've that much respect for you—maybe for myself too. I was supposed to drive her back to the station yesterday afternoon. I didn't. I think I was afraid to see her again. She had a lot of sex appeal, especially—" He stopped speaking, ripped off a daisy by the stem, started to pluck the petals. "She'd still be alive if I'd driven her to the train. In a way I'm responsible for her death."

"You couldn't know, Tony." The compassionate words came out by themselves. Whatever he did to her there would always be compassion for him. And love too, she thought, which perhaps was the same thing.

His fist closed over the daisy, crushing it. "You told Helm that I keep running away from you. That's right. I run away. From you. From Hessian Valley. From every job I've ever had, honest or crooked. Yesterday I ran away from Jeannie Poole. That was the line of least resistance.

"All I had to do was not pick her up at Kinard's and not buy her a dinner and not see her on a train. She'd get on the train without me. But she never did. She missed it and stayed for another night and now she's dead."

He was only a boy, lost and alone and bewildered. He needed to be taken in her arms and comforted.

"I don't have to tell you that I've loved you since we were high school kids," he was saying.

The spell was broken. He had jerked her away from compassion to the bitterness of frustrated years. There were sarcastic retorts to be made but she was too dispirited for them. She sat on her bare legs and ran soil-stained fingers through the grass.

"I've done my good deed," he went on. "I've tried to save you from me. You don't know how hard it was. In the army I was like other men, yearning to return home to their women. When I came home there you were. But I couldn't hurt you that much. I could hurt everybody but you, myself most of all."

Another daisy was being torn apart by his long fingers. "So I kept running away from you but I didn't do a good job even of that. I couldn't stop coming back every now and then."

What could she say? She knew that he seldom took the trouble to lie and that now he was being as honest with her as a man could be with a woman. It was her fault. She should have put herself beyond him by marrying somebody else.

"Rebecca, will you marry me?" he asked quietly.

So this was how, after all these years, the proposal came. Not holding her in his arms in the moonlight or on the living room couch. Not in a moment of romance and tenderness but sitting here on the grass under the watchful eye of Mike Faye, and after talk of murder. She was staring down at her tanned hand flat on a bare tanned thigh.

"No?" he said after he had let the silence hang between them for a while. "Is that your answer?"

She raised somber brown eyes. "If you'd asked me Tuesday night when I came to your house . . ."

"Tuesday I was a fool. I've found out that nothing is worth anything but you. Maybe I won't be a good husband. I'm nobody to be proud of. But I think that with you I'll get on an even keel. I need you, Rebecca. I've needed you most of my life and I've never had enough sense to realize it." His thin mouth twisted in that crooked grin of his. "That's not much to offer a girl."

It was as much as she had ever expected. It could be everything. She had overlooked so much that she could overlook the Jean Pooles and everything else. Marriage could mean a fresh beginning for both of them.

She remained silent.

"You're afraid of me," he said. "That's it, isn't it? Cooperman is pretty sure I murdered Isabel and Jeannie."

"No, Tony!" That would be the ultimate horror. The thought was there, deep in her mind, but rejected.

He put a hand on her calf and squeezed the firm flesh. She smiled tremulously, giving him her answer.

"We'll go off as soon as you pack and get dressed," he said eagerly. "There's no sense waiting around here while you're in danger."

SOMETHING caught in her throat. She cleared enough of it to say, "Is that why you want to marry me—to get me away from danger?"

"Don't be silly, sweetheart. But as long as we're going to get married, why hang around where you need a body-

guard? Besides, your father objects to me. It'll be easier all around if you hand him an accomplished fact."

Rebecca looked down at his hand on her calf. "I don't know, darling. This rush . . ."

"Lord knows we've waited long enough for each other. All you have to do is pack a bag. We'll send for the rest of your clothes when we're married. I'll borrow my mother's car and we'll head west. We'll stop off somewhere to get a license and tie the knot." He pushed his head closer to her, studying her face. "You're still afraid of me."

"No, darling, that's not it at all." And it wasn't. He was her man now, completely and forever. "All right, darling, tomorrow."

"Today is better than tomorrow or the next day. We can leave in an hour."

"Mike wouldn't let me go. We'll have to wait till this evening."

"Then it's yes?"

"Yes, darling."

He shifted toward her and they sat on the grass in each other's arms. As their lips met his hands moved up along the sides of her body, under her arms. He grabbed her wrists, held them tightly against her hips, forced her toward the grass. She went limp.

"Hey!" Mike yelled.

He was running toward them, his fists clenched, his powerful arms swinging.

With a shy laugh, she broke away from Tony. "Mike, can't a girl even be kissed?"

"Sure, Miss Sprague. I mean—" Mike gulped with embarrassment. From the terrace he had seen her clasped in a man's arms but he hadn't seen that hands weren't at her throat. "I got my orders from Mr. Sprague."

He turned back to the terrace. Slowly she and Tony followed, their arms about each other's waists.

"You go now, darling," she whispered. "I don't want Father to find you here. I'll phone you when I can get out and you can pick me up on the highway."

"Can't you make it in an hour?"

"I don't see how. But it won't be long now, darling. Before evening."

Holding her hands against her body he kissed her hard on the mouth and strode down the stone steps.

She stood watching him walk down the road, thinking that now it was all over, the hopeless waiting, and also the terror of recent days. There was a quietness in her now, a sense of fulfillment. She and Tony, the way it had always been meant to be.

13. Tony Bascomb

HIS corduroy jacket felt like a soggy blanket weighing down his shoulders. Tony unbuttoned it on the porch and stripped it off on the way up the stairs. The chief trouble with wearing a gun was that you couldn't kiss a girl in comfort.

He kept thinking of those kisses as he stood under the shower. The cold water felt good on his body. He felt good deep inside too. He thought of how Rebecca had looked half an hour ago, so excitingly lovely in white shorts and jersey, her skin so wholesomely tan, her body sweetly curved—all woman, all desirable, soon all his.

Tony was getting into his trousers when the phone rang. Rebecca so soon? Swell. It couldn't be soon enough. He rushed down the stairs with the zest of a young boy.

Myra had beaten him to the phone. She glanced at him, said into the mouthpiece, "He's right here," and then said to Tony, "It's that Mr. Helm again. He's been calling you all afternoon."

Tony took the phone from her and listened to Ben Helm say, "Of course we tied up Jean Poole with Beau Bruff. He's supposed to come back from Pittsburgh today. I don't imagine he'll waste time getting up here."

"So?" Tony said.

"I suppose you know the score but I don't think there'll be a kick from the D.A. if you leave town for a few days."

Tony grinned. "Thanks, shamus. I'm taking your advice."

When he hung up his mother asked anxiously, "What did he want?"

"Just some more red tape. By the way, can I use your car tonight?"

He'd want it for a lot longer than tonight but she wouldn't at all mind when she learned that he'd used it to elope with Rebecca. In fact, he'd make her

happier than ever before in his life.

He returned to his room and finished dressing. He put on a snappy gray suit, a checkered gray shirt and a flamboyant red bow tie with yellow dots. He hesitated, then strapped on the holster, stuck the Luger into it, buttoned his jacket.

After that he waited for Rebecca's phone call.

It didn't come during supper. Seven o'clock passed. Eight o'clock. It was getting later every minute.

His mother had a Home Bureau meeting at the school and he had promised to drive her there. It was only a three minute drive to the school and then three minutes back but he drove back through the warm June evening at breakneck speed. Rebecca might have called while he was gone. It was getting later and later.

He slowed the car almost to a stop at the driveway. No other car there—no sign of anybody. He opened his jacket as he went up on the porch and looked about before entering the house.

Outside it was still broad daylight, but the heavy drapes on the windows had brought deep twilight into the living room. He put on a table lamp.

"Hello, Tony," Beau Bruff said quietly.

He stood in the arched doorway between the dining room and the living room. He held a snub-nosed automatic.

Tony pinched a cigarette out of the pack in his hand. Too late for anything now except not to show that he knew it was too late. "Been here long, Beau?" he asked conversationally.

"Not so long. I saw you drive off with a woman. She your old lady?"

"Yes."

Bruff nodded. "I don't want anybody around but you. I figured maybe you'd come back alone, so I stepped in here to wait."

Bruff was, as always, neatly and conservatively attired, this time in a double-breasted serge suit and white shirt and subdued blue necktie. His clean-shaven face was inclined to jowls because of good living and because he was crowding fifty but he was not fleshy anywhere else. In a well-dressed crowd he could pass for a moderately successful business man or politician, both of which he was in his own way. He was also a man with a gun.

TONY struck a match. With an effort of will he kept the flame from jittering at the tip of his cigarette. His hand was as close to his shoulder holster as he could get it without making a conspicuous move but that still left his gun under his jacket. If he could get the jump maybe Bruff would miss the first shot or not hit a vulnerable spot. That was the remote chance to be taken where there was no other chance.

Bruff said, "Let's see your hands in the air, Tony, and then turn around."

Too late for that also. Bruff was too experienced in this sort of thing. He took no risk and now he had only to squeeze his trigger and end it in a split second. Everything today had been too late.

Tony obeyed. Bruff came up behind him and he felt the hard muzzle of the automatic dig into his back. Bruff reached around Tony with his left hand, yanked back the jacket, pulled out the Luger. Tony thought wryly of the futile precaution of lugging the Luger around since Tuesday.

"Sit down," Bruff said, stepping back with a gun in each hand. "Make yourself comfortable."

So it wouldn't come at once. Bruff would have sent the hired help for a routine killing. Besides, Bruff was a man of many words, even at a time like this.

Tony sat on the armchair beside the radio. He crossed his legs. He flicked ashes into an ashtray and made his voice drawl. "I didn't kill Jeannie if that's your idea."

"You live and learn," Bruff said thoughtfully. "I figure most women are tramps but I kidded myself that Jeannie was different. She headed for you as soon as I hopped a plane for Pittsburgh. Two-timing me all along. You and how many others, Tony."

"I wouldn't know."

Bruff took a step to his right so that he stood directly in front of Tony, but not close. A gun rested lightly against each hip like an idealized photo of a Western badman.

"I liked Jeannie," Bruff said without emotion, "but not enough to gun a guy because she two-timed me with him. I'm no romantic kid. Women aren't that important to me. I would've smacked her around and tossed her out of my house and the hell with the guy. So the

little tramp's dead and I don't give a damn who did it, you or anybody else. No, Tony, I've got other business with you."

Tony drew smoke into his lungs. "I'm afraid I made a mistake."

"Kid, you sure did," Bruff agreed. "You know why I didn't gun you from behind when you hung up that phone a couple minutes ago? You know why I'm taking the time to talk to you?"

"I give up. Why?"

"Because I want to know why you cost me thirty grand in furs and a six-grand truck. I sleep tight, Tony, but these nights I'm bothered. In bed I keep thinking—this guy Tony was a little too big for his pants and made too quick with the wisecracks but he was a good worker. He had guts and he was smart. I have plenty of boys with guts but not smart, too, like Tony.

"Then I think some more. I think—if he's so smart why does he pull a crazy thing like that? Why does he throw away his cut on the furs? Maybe, I think, there's more to it than I can see. So I want to know why, Tony?"

What difference would an answer make? Tony wasn't sure that he knew it himself and it wouldn't appease Bruff.

"Nothing to say, eh?" Bruff's tone sharpened with irritation. "Losing the furs and the truck could've been just one of those things—the chances we take in the game. But the way I lost them—I don't like to be laughed at, Tony."

Tony brought up a piece of his twisted grin. "You're too smart to do anything to me."

KEEPING his eyes and both hands on Tony Beau Bruff moved sideways to the radio. With the hand holding the Luger he fumbled behind him for the dials. Then facing each other they waited. Gradually sound built up to the dulcet tones of a radio voice. Again Bruff groped for the dials, and music came on, a raucous band playing a current song hit. Bruff turned the sound up.

So a brassy popular song would be his elegy. This was the accepted technique—radio music turned on full force to drown out the sounds of shots. It would come soon enough now, taking it here in this chair in his mother's living room, without warning, without pain. Suddenly nothing.

Beau Bruff had returned to his former position facing the chair. "Why," he asked, "am I too smart to do anything about you?"

"You should know the answer," Tony said. "The New York cops told you Jeannie had been murdered in Hessian Valley. The local cops expect you up here to claim her body. They warned me to watch out for you. They think you'll go after me because of Jeannie. They'll have no trouble pinning my murder on you."

"So you think they'll pin it on me?" Beau Bruff smiled frostily. "Let 'em figure I shot you down. Maybe I want 'em to. I want everybody to know how I fixed the guy who made me lose furs and a truck and started everybody laughing at me. But pin it on me? You think I'm dumb?"

"You act it," Tony said. "You must have asked somebody how to get to my house."

Bruff looked pleased. He enjoyed talking, and especially to this man he was about to kill.

"I drove up from New York. I stopped off at a town along the way. I called up the first Hessian Valley number I found in the book. A dame answered. I said I was an electric repair man and I couldn't get the Bascombs on the phone and could she tell me how I could find the house. She gave me directions.

"I drove by and saw your name on a mailbox on the road and went on and hid my car off the road and walked back. After I'm through here I'll go back to my car and drive to the cops like I'd just come from New York and say I'm here to claim Jeannie's body. Sweet, eh?"

Tony shook his head. "You must have been seen walking here. It was still daylight."

"Who'll remember me?"

"The police will put two and two together." Tony tried to keep a note of desperation out of his voice.

"Like I said, let 'em. Even if somebody saw me they won't remember me." Bruff glanced down at the heavy Luger in his left hand. "Guess which one of these rods is going to spit lead? The cops will find you shot with your own gun. Maybe you had a fight with a dame and she grabbed it off you and let you have it. Maybe anything. So many may-

bes that the cops will never have anything on me."

The radio music was very loud. Bruff was almost shouting to be heard over it. Now, even for him, he had had enough of words. He raised the Luger.

The door opened.

A dying man, Tony told himself, had visions. It was proper that his last vision on earth was of Rebecca standing in the doorway, incredibly lovely in a strawberry-pink cotton dress and a huge straw handbag worn by a strap from her right shoulder and a tiny straw beret on her brown hair.

But there was a terrible strangeness in her face—deep, harsh lines he had never before seen in it. She held her arms stiffly bent, one clenched hand against her left hip, the other hidden behind her handbag.

"Who's that?" Beau Bruff demanded hoarsely.

He had scurried to the middle of the room so that he could keep his eyes on her without letting Tony out of his sight.

Reality and unreality merged. Tony gripped the arms of the chair as she lifted the pistol and fired.

14. Ben Helm

ON the way there Ben Helm and Chief Cooperman picked up Jay Sprague. The big, flabby man came to the door with a note in his hand.

"She's gone," Sprague said. "I was just going to call you. She left this note saying she went off with Tony Bascomb. You've got to bring them back before he can—can—"

"There's been a shooting," Cooperman blurted. "Tony called me and said—"

"Shooting!" All of Sprague's flabbiness seemed to be flowing toward the floor.

"Rebecca's all right," Ben said quickyy. "A gangster's been shot. They're at Tony's house."

Cooperman went ahead in his car; Ben followed with Sprague in Sprague's sedan. When they entered the Bascomb house they found the chief kneeling beside the motionless man on the floor.

Tony Bascomb stood at the foot of the stairs, one of his arms resting negligently on the rounded top of the newel post. He squinted against the smoke flowing up from the cigarette between his tight lips.

"Dead, all right," Cooperman said.

Tony twisted his head to Sprague, who stared slack-mouthed at the body. "Rebecca's in the kitchen."

For a long moment Sprague looked at him. Then he shambled around the dead man and into the dining room. Tony started after him and changed his mind. He expelled smoke through his nostrils.

"Three holes in the face," Coopermen informed Ben. "Looks like two bullets. Very little blood."

Ben crouched over the dead face. A small blue wound was in the right temple. Probably that was the one that had done the job. There was another wound like it in the right cheek. The wound in the left cheek was larger and higher and ragged, the point of exit of the bullet."

"You might find more slugs in the body," Tony drawled. "The gun was emptied at him. Though some slugs missed."

Cooperman went to the phone on the small table to get the red tape going. Ben remained at the body.

Bruff's outflung right hand still gripped a .32-caliber Colt automatic. Near the drawn-up left leg lay a wicked black Luger. Generally it was impossible to determine the caliber of a bullet from the size of the wound but obviously these hadn't been drilled by a 9 mm. slug.

Ben straightened up. "Where's the gun that killed him?"

Tony took a neat little .25 caliber automatic out of his pocket. "I shot him with this."

"That's Rebecca Sprague's gun," Cooperman, speaking to somebody on the phone, interrupted himself excitedly. "I got it for her the other day." He thrust his jaw at Tony. "How come you have it?"

"Rebecca let me keep it for her."

"Like hell!" Ben said. "Save your gallantry for when it can do some good."

He skirted around the dead man and entered the dining room. Ahead was the open kitchen door. He heard Tony follow him as he stepped through it.

Sprague was clasping Rebecca against his wide chest. They stood beside a porcelain table. He was saying, "Don't utter another word. You only get yourself hysterical." He turned his head. "Helm, I'm taking her home at once."

Rebecca's face moved out from her father's chest. Some of the bloom had left her rounded cheeks and there was horror deep in her brown eyes but she didn't look hysterical. Her voice was wearily bitter.

"Do you remember, Mr. Helm, when I told you I could never kill a man? I killed a man tonight." Her fingers hooked into her father's shirt. "I shot and shot until he was dead."

"Stop it!" Sprague said. "Tony admitted he killed him. My God, do you have to take the blame for him?"

"Tony wants to take the blame for me. He tried to persuade me to say he'd done it." She leaned closer into her father's embrace. "But he didn't. I did."

"Don't try to protect me, sweetheart," Tony drawled. He had a fresh cigarette between his lips. "I'm not in a spot."

"That's why you can afford to be gallant," Ben told him sourly. "Miss Sprague, don't let the fact that you shot Bruff bother you. It comes under the heading of a good deed."

SPRAGUE glowered. "Helm, my impression is that I am paying you very good money to work for us. My daughter's welfare is your responsibility."

"So is the truth," Ben said. "This may be merely a technicality because it's justifiable homicide, whoever pulled the trigger. But I like the facts to be straight. Suppose you tell us, Miss Sprague."

Cooperman had entered the kitchen. He stepped forward, asserting his authority. "This is my job, Helm. You're working for the Spragues."

"So I'm being reminded by everybody," Ben observed dryly. "All right, Miss Sprague, tell it to the chief. I'll simply listen."

Rebecca eased away from her father and sat down at the table. The four men remained on their feet. She stretched out her arms on the porcelain table top and stared at her clasped hands.

"This afternoon Tony and I planned to go off and be married. I knew my father would object, so I was to phone Tony and then slip out and meet him." She lifted contrite eyes. "I'm sorry, Father. I didn't want to hurt you but you'd accept Tony when we were married."

Sprague took out his pocket handkerchief and seemed to try to tear it apart.

"Father was reading in the living room," she went on, her gaze again on her clasped hands. "The phone is in the hall on the other side of the living room doorway. He would hear me if I called Tony. It was getting very late."

Ben said, "Chief, may I ask her a question?"

"Sure. Why not?" Cooperman was satisfied with having made it clear that he was the cop on the case.

"Thanks," Ben said. "Miss Sprague, why was it getting very late? Why couldn't you have postponed it until next day or longer?"

"Tony insisted that it be today. He said I was in danger every minute I remained in Hessian Valley."

"Uh-huh. *You* in danger!" Savagely Ben jabbed his pipe stem at Tony. "You—"

One corner of Tony's mouth tightened on his cigarette. "Are you going to start lecturing again, shamus?"

"No. Go on, Miss Sprague."

"I slipped out through the back door with my bags," Rebecca said. "They were very heavy. I left them in some bushes off Digby Road and walked to Tony's house—this house. I remember hearing the radio when I was still on the road."

"Bruff turned it up to drown out the shots," Tony explained. "That's why we didn't hear her come up."

"But I heard voices when I was on the porch," she said to her clasped hands. "There was a strange voice saying something about shooting somebody. I looked through the window next to the door. There were drapes but between them I could see into the room. Tony was sitting in a chair and a man was standing in front of him with a gun in each hand. He was talking, saying he was going to kill Tony. I was terribly frightened. I was frantic. Then I thought of the gun in my handbag."

Ben said, "Why did you bring your gun along?"

"Why?" The question puzzled her. her. "Chief Cooperman told me to carry it all the time."

"But you were leaving Hessian Valley," Ben said. "You were going away from danger. Yet you transferred your gun to the handbag you were carrying to go away with Tony."

Cooperman spoke up. "I'll tell you why. She figured she might have to use it to protect herself against Tony."

It was suddenly very still in the kitchen. Sprague stopped mangling his handkerchief and stared in hopeless bewilderment at his daughter. Tony leaning against the refrigerator, blew smoke circles at the ceiling.

"You mustn't say that." Rebecca's head was up, her rounded chin set defiantly. "I took the gun because I was going to walk to Tony's house. I hadn't forgotten what almost happened to me the last time I walked alone in the evening."

THE knuckles of her clasped hands whitened. Her voice thinned, became remote. "I had to do something to save Tony's life. And I had a gun. I don't remember thinking. I only acted. I took the gun out of the bag and went in. I wasn't sure what I would do.

"Then I was inside and the man was looking at me with two guns in his hands and I knew he was going to shoot me if I didn't shoot him. I stood there and shot at him and shot and shot. I don't remember willing myself to shoot. I just shot and shot and he fell down." Her hands jerked up to cover her face. "I killed a man," she sobbed.

There was nothing to be asked after that, nothing to be said. Helplessly Sprague rested a flabby hand on her head. The other men listened to the sound of her weeping, watching the shaking of her fine shoulders.

"Why the devil don't you let her go home?" Tony burst out.

Sprague's head swiveled slowly on his meaty neck. His eyes, resting for a long moment on Tony, had the expression of a man who sees something particularly repulsive. Then he looked down at his daughter. "Come, Rebecca."

"Go ahead," Cooperman said, recalling his authority. "We can get her signed statement tomorrow."

Rebecca rose. Like a small girl, she dabbed at her eyes with her knuckles. Sprague took her arm and started to lead her to the dining room door.

"Not that way," Ben warned. "Take her out the back door."

Sprague nodded. Without volition Rebecca moved wherever her father led her. She passed very close to Tony lounging against the refrigerator.

He took the cigarette from his mouth. "So long, Rebecca."

Her step faltered, then she went on without looking at him. A door at the far end of the kitchen led directly out of the house. She and her father went slowly through it.

When they were gone, Chief Cooperman aimed a quivering bony finger at Tony. "You aren't worth a fine girl like her saving your life."

"Well, the damage has been done—I'm still alive." Tony tossed his cigarette into the sink. "How long is that body going to be in there?"

"Till we get good and ready to remove it. Why, does it bother you?"

"Not me," Tony said. "I like Beau Bruff the way he is now. But it will bother my mother if she walks in on a dead man in her living room. I'm going over to the school and break the news to her and tell her to spend the night at a friend's house."

"You're going nowhere," Cooperman snapped and immediately changed his mind. "All right but come right back. I feel sorry for your mother. Always did because she had you for a son. I feel sorry for any woman who gives a hang for you, like Rebecca Sprague and Jean Poole."

"Hell!" Tony said. "Lecturing cops turn my stomach." He pulled open the back door.

Ben was right behind him. When he stepped into the deepening darkness behind the house he saw that Tony had paused to wait for him. The outer edge of headlights receded from beyond one side of the house. That would be Jay Sprague backing out of the driveway.

"More heckling, shamus?" Tony said. "Something you don't want Cooperman in on?"

"I'd like you to tell me why Bruff wanted to kill you."

"For the reason you warned me this afternoon to watch out for him. Jeannie's murder told him where I was and that I was playing around with her."

"You didn't seem eager to play around with her yesterday."

Tony moved toward the rear corner of the house. They rounded the corner.

"Can't a guy get tired of a woman?" Tony said.

"Uh-huh. But you were wearing the Luger yesterday when you thought she'd returned to New York."

They had reached the battered sedan parked in front of Cooperman's car. Tony lounged against a front fender. "Will it be off the record, shamus?"

HELM said, "Strictly off the record. That's why I'm asking you when an official cop isn't around."

"Okay, though I don't see what good it'll do except satisfy your curiosity. Did you hear about a truckload of hijacked furs found in front of a Newark police station Monday night?"

"No."

"I guess it wasn't much of a story except maybe in the Newark papers and the cops couldn't officially pin the job on Beau Bruff. I don't want them to pin it on me either, which is why this is off the record. I'm the lad left the truck there."

"Uh-huh," Ben said, drawing on his pipe.

"Doesn't it strike you as screwy?"

"I don't know the background."

"The usual thing. Bruff knew a truck would be rolling down New Jersey with thirty grand in furs from New York market. He sent a bunch of his boys to hijack it. A couple of them took the driver and his helper into the woods and kept them there while the rest of us transferred the furs into another truck that could go back to New York with little chance of the cops suspecting what it contained.

"My job was to drive that truck. Another guy was with me. Outside of Newark I told him that I thought I had a flat. When he got off to look I drove away, leaving him on the road. I rolled into Newark and parked the truck in front of a police station and took a train home."

"Why?" Ben said.

"You tell me. Bruff didn't understand it. That's why he came up here to do the job on me himself instead of sending one of the hired help. He wanted to find out why. One of the reasons I didn't tell him was that I didn't know myself." Light from a window touched a shadowy grin on Tony's face. "You're a smart cookie for a shamus. What do you think?"

"The chip on your shoulder," Ben said. "Life played you a dirty trick when you were a kid by taking away your father for whom you cared so much. You'd show life. You'd kick authority in the teeth every chance you got. Police authority and school authority and army authority and even the authority of dangerous gangsters you were tied up with."

Tony laughed derisively. "You make it complicated. All that happened was that as I was driving along with the furs I suddenly decided that I'd be damned if I'd turn the furs over to Beau Bruff."

"Even though you knew that Bruff couldn't let you get away with it?"

"I've taken chances before."

"Uh-huh. But this was for none of the reasons for which people usually take chances. You had nothing to gain and a lot to lose by abandoning that truck."

"I just didn't give a damn. The fact is, I never did like crooks. I never could stand any of them for more than a little while."

"You were punishing yourself," Ben said. "Unconsciously you wanted Bruff to go gunning for you. It was your method of atonement."

"Oh, hell!" Tony drawled. He straightened up beside the fender. "Okay, I told you what a Boy Scout I was. Satisfied?"

"I'd think a lot more of you if you'd stuck to your determination to stay away from Rebecca."

Tony sneered, "You don't think that now that I've reformed I'll make her a good husband?"

"I think that by persuading her to marry you you've destroyed the one decent act of your life."

Shadows made flat static planes of Tony's face. "You know, shamus, I've an idea I'm going to surprise a lot of people, including myself, by making her happy."

"If it's not too late."

Abruptly Tony stepped sideways and opened the car door. He slid behind the wheel and turned to the open window. In the dark car his face was almost invisible.

"Shamus," he said softly, "I'd like it an awful lot if you'd pick up Jeannie's killer. The fancy way your mind works I think you might." He put on the car

lights and stepped on the starter.

Sucking his pipe, Ben watched the car climb the lawn to swing around Cooperman's car. He went into the house. Cooperman was again on the phone. Beau Bruff lay placidly on the floor with a gun in his hand and three holes in his face.

15. Mark Kinard

PROBABLY it would rain. Gray clouds hung low over the valley and the air was sticky. Mark felt himself sweat as he stood shaving in front of the bathroom mirror.

Through the mirror at his right shoulder he could look down at all twelve cabins. Last night, for a change, all of them had been taken. Now, though it was past ten in the morning, half the guests were still here. Even during a trip people liked to linger in bed late on a Sunday.

Pa was sitting on the Adirondack chair talking to a couple of men guests. These days Pa had plenty of food for conversation. The story was that last night Rebecca had gone to Tony's house to elope with him and had found Jeannie Poole's lover about to kill Tony and had shot the man dead.

To Mark only one part of that was important. Rebecca and Tony had decided to get married and it was all over for him. He knew that it had never really started for him but now the dream was definitely shattered and there was nothing left to take its place.

Ben Helm came out of his cabin. He paused to put a match to his pipe. When he was moving again he lifted his eyes to the bathroom window. Mark snatched up a towel and wiped lather from his face and went downstairs.

Emily was in the dining room, curled up on the wooden armchair in her pajamas and speaking into the priate phone.

"Isn't it awfully romantic, Bob?" she was saying. "I mean it's awful somebody being killed, even a gangster but I mean Rebecca saving the life of the man she loves."

Mark stood looking at her and then looked through the door into the kitchen. Ma had left for church right after breakfast. The dirty dishes were still on the table.

"I'd love to, Bob," Emily said into the phone. "I'll be dressed in half an hour. . . . Well, all right, fifteen minutes. Don't forget to bring a racket for me."

Mark took two more steps into the dining room. He felt his hands clench. When Emily hung up, he said, "Where do you think you're going?"

His sister pushed her fuzzy slippers over her bare heels and stood up, tugging down the jacket of her very thin pajamas, which made her look more sloppy than indecent. Her face wore the childishly haughty expression she reserved for him.

"If you must know Bob Hutch has invited me to play tennis with him."

"What about cleaning up the kitchen first? Or do you expect Ma to do it when she comes home?"

"I am afraid," she said in her affected tone, "that I won't have the time." She started to move past him to the door, her broad hips defiantly undulating.

He caught her wrist. "Damn it, I've stood enough from you!"

She pulled away from him. "Don't you dare touch me!" Then she screamed.

HE hadn't realized that he had twisted her arm. Now he saw that she was squirming with her knees bent. He didn't stop. He slapped her face with his other hand.

"Damn it!" he panted. "Who do you think you are in this house?"

Emily was silent now though he was still hurting her. Her teeth were clamped in her lower lip as if to refuse to give him the satisfaction of hearing her cry out. He wanted to slap her again. He raised his hand.

"You might break her arm," a quiet voice said.

Ben Helm had entered the dining room. He stood with his pipe inches from his mouth and there was controlled fury in his eyes.

Shame hit Mark in the stomach. He released his sister.

Emily straightened up, holding her bruised wrist. Turning, she found herself facing Helm. Her arms jerked over her breasts. She plunged past Helm. Mark heard her sob as she ran.

"You've got a nerve, snooping in this house," Mark said.

"I was about to make a phone call and heard her scream." Helm stuck his pipe into his mouth and went back into the hall.

Mark found that he was rubbing his hands up and down his thighs. His palms were sweating. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped them. A coin dropped into the hall pay phone. The dial clicked.

Mark didn't move. Outside a car motor started. Inside Helm spoke in an almost inaudible tone into the phone. Mark ran the handkerchief over his face.

He remained where he was until he heard the screen door close behind Helm. Then he went out to the hall and stopped. From there Emily's broken weeping came down from her room. Again he was rubbing his hands on his thighs. He ascended the stairs.

Emily's door was open. She lay on the bed, her face buried in the pillow.

"Emily," he said.

Her cheek turned on the pillow. "Let me alone," she sobbed. "You hate me."

"No." His voice was soft, gentle. He sat down on the bed. "Maybe I hate myself but I don't hate you."

"You—you hurt me."

He dropped a hand on her shoulder. Through the thin pajamas her flesh felt smooth and warm. "I'm sorry, Emily."

She looked up at him as if she had never seen him before.

"Have a good time," he said. "It isn't fair that I should keep you from having fun because I never did."

She reached for his hand. She squeezed it. They sat like that amid sounds of departing guests drifting up through the open windows.

16. Rebecca Sprague

REBECCA saw Tony's mother's car rattle up the road and quickly stepped out to the terrace so that her father could not try to keep them apart. She was sitting on the chaise longue when he came up to her.

"Listen," Tony said urgently. "Beau Bruff didn't come after me because of Jeannie Poole. He was gunning for me because I quit his racket."

Since early morning rain had threatened. Oppressively the air waited for the storm to break, and it was as if the dead weight of it were deep inside her.

"Does it matter?" she muttered.

"Maybe not. Last night mustn't change anything. I love you, Rebecca. That's the important thing."

Her father had come outside. His bulk filled the doorway, that flabby tiredness possessing all of him, his pale sad eyes watching them. He would not interfere now, but he would remain there in case Tony's hands reached for her throat.

"Last night Ben Helm was disgusted with you," she told Tony listlessly. "I know why. You had persuaded me that you were rushing me away to protect me but it was really to protect yourself."

"Both of us, sweetheart. We both had to get away in a hurry."

"You've never thought of anybody but yourself," she said.

"And maybe not much of myself either." He sat at her feet, hunched forward with his forearms on his thighs and there was a hollowness in his cheeks that made his long face look gaunt.

"I knew Bruff was coming to kill me, but till last night I didn't care much one way or the other. Then I wanted to stay alive so I could have you. All at once I had something to live for. I've always had, I guess, but yesterday I really knew it."

A dark splotch of moisture, big as a half-dollar, appeared on a flagstone. As she stared at it a raindrop struck her cheek. It felt pleasantly cool.

"No, Tony," she said.

"No what?"

"I could have overlooked everything else. But not that you made me kill a man."

"There wouldn't have been enough of me left to forgive if you hadn't filled him with lead," he said wryly. "As Helm said last night you can chalk that up as a good deed."

"It's no use, Tony. Last night I discovered that we're two different kinds of people."

His hand dropped to her knee. She stood up to avoid his touch.

"So it's all over?" he said.

She looked down at his lean youthful face over the bright youthful bow tie

and wondered dully what had happened to the old long-enduring tenderness.

"Yes, Tony," she said. "It's all over."

The mockery was back in his lazy voice, in his shaded eyes. "My mother will be disappointed." He rose beside her. "Do we say good-by, sweetheart?"

"Good-by, Tony," she said emptily and moved toward the house.

Her father was no longer in the doorway but he stood just inside the hall. He looked at her and then past her, watching Tony go down the steps to the road.

"I'm not going to marry Tony," she said quietly.

Her father nodded slowly. "That's George's car," he said absently.

Through the open door Rebecca saw the flashy convertible stop behind Tony's shabby sedan. George Dentz got out. Tony sauntered over to him and the two men stood talking beside the convertible.

She stepped forward to close the door and saw Ben Helm. He stood in the meadow beyond the end of the road on the path winding up the hill past Cream Brook. He was watching Tony and George. She wondered if he had been standing there, watching her and Tony on the terrace. It was starting to rain harder but none of the three men outside seemed to notice.

She closed the door all the way. "Father, please tell George that I have a headache."

SHE went into her room and lay down on her bed. There was a breathlessness in her, as if waiting with unendurable suspense for something to happen, though it seemed that everything possible had already happened to her. But there were still a pair of restless hands that had murdered twice and perhaps were eager to murder again.

Voices were suddenly in the house. They approached her room and then knuckles rapped. "Rebecca?" her father said.

"Come in," she muttered. She swung her legs off the bed, pulling her skirt down over her knees as her father and Ben Helm entered.

"Do you mind a few questions?" the detective asked.

"Does it matter if I mind?"

"I'd like to know who visited you and who phoned you since Wednesday morning."

She said apathetically, "Father insisted on answering all the phone calls. He objected to my speaking to any of the men I know. I didn't particularly care to anyway, so I didn't make a fuss over being treated like a child. Several of my girl friends phoned. Of course I spoke to them."

"What about visitors?"

"Tony was here yesterday, as you know, while father was away. Then a while ago Tony was here again and George too but you saw them."

"Uh-huh. Does that finish the visits?"

"Why must you know?"

"For your sake."

"There was nobody else except Tony one night. Thursday, I think."

"He came here?" her father burst out. "But that's impossible. I was with you every moment."

She didn't look at her father. "It was after you were asleep. Tony was outside the window and woke me. We talked through the screen."

"Did he ask you to come outside?" Helm said.

"He—" Her lips tightened and loosened.

"Yes, but I didn't care to."

"My God!" her father said. "You must have realized why he wanted to get you out of the house. And after that you were so senseless that you agreed to go off with him!"

"You're wrong, Father. Tony—" Her hands came up over her face. "Please leave me alone," she sobbed.

Helm moved to the door. Her father nodded ponderously and followed him out of the room, closing the door behind him. Trembling, she flung herself on the bed.

They were standing on the other side of the closed door, speaking in undertones, but she could hear what they were saying.

"So that's why you asked those questions," her father said. "You wanted to find out who tried to get her off by herself."

"Who phoned her since Wednesday morning?" Helm asked.

"Well, there was George Dentz, of course. He was here Wednesday morning but I told him he couldn't see her. After that he phoned several times a day on business and sometimes asked to speak to Rebecca but I always put him off."

"What about Mark Kinard?"

"He didn't come or phone. He at least understood how I felt about visitors. But that Tony—he phoned Wednesday. I let him know bluntly how I felt about him. But the next night he sneaked up to the house while I slept. My God, if that gangster hadn't come to his house last night and she had actually gone away with him—"

"Take it easy," Helm said. "It's my job to work it out."

"Haven't you worked it out yet? Isn't it obvious?"

"Not the way you think," Helm said.

Then there was nothing else—no more voices, not even the sounds of them moving away from the door. Rebecca lay on the bed in vast, overwhelming silence. The rain had stopped. She felt that she was gagging and the last words she had heard Ben Helm utter were a dull pounding in her brain.

"Not the way you think."

What had he meant?

Outside the sky opened. Rain came down as if spilled from a gigantic bucket, pounding the house. Turning on her side Rebecca breathed in the suddenly clean fresh air.

17. Ben Helm

THE rain caught Ben Helm. A couple of minutes after he reached the highway Chief Cooperman happened to come along in his white police car but by that time it was too late. Ben was soaked to the skin.

"I've been thinking," Cooperman said when Ben was settled beside him. "We got a certain number of suspects. Let's make them take lie-detector tests."

"You can't make them."

"We can ask them. Anybody refuses, we know he's afraid to take it."

"There are ways to beat a lie detector," Ben said.

"But do those who take the test know how? Besides, that's not the only way to get the truth out of people. I read of a way to tell what's on people's minds by giving them screwy pictures to look at. You take a suspect and ask him what the pictures or dots or scrawls or whatever mean. If he answers in a certain way you know he has a criminal mind."

"The Rorshach and Thematic Apperception Tests," Ben said absently.

"That the name? What a mouthful! Well then, you know about it."

"Uh-huh. At best the tests show only potential mental conflicts and who hasn't them? And there's no agreement on scoring techniques and diagnosis. In my opinion a parlor game."

Cooperman swung the car into the Kinard driveway. "Sit here a minute," he said as Ben started to open the door. "What about this truth serum?"

"Hypnosis-inducing drugs like sodium pentothal. That might work but so does a rubber hose."

"You mean rough stuff like beating somebody up?" Cooperman looked hurt. "I don't go for that."

"But you'll go for psychological rough stuff like lie detectors or the Rorshach tests or pumping a suspect full of narcotics. If I had to choose, I'd prefer a rubber hose as a more decent and honest assault on human dignity."

Cooperman's brows creased with the attempt to follow him. "Why should we give a hoot about the dignity of a murderer?"

"We should at least care about our own dignity and the dignity of civilized law. We hold that no man can be forced to testify against himself but every day we're evolving cute ways of getting around it."

"You object to criminals confessing?"

"No. Confession is good for the soul. I don't object to persuading him with words but this opening up his mind with gadgets and dope—"

"What's the difference?" Cooperman cut in.

Ben smiled wryly. "That's an ethical point, but the trouble with being a manhunter is that you have to compromise with ethics all along the way." He opened the car door against the storm. "Most criminals want to confess but they need a little prodding. I'll be seeing you very soon, I think." He plunged into the rain.

He ran with his head down. On the porch he paused to shake water off his hat and wipe his wet face with his handkerchief. The white car was leaving the driveway. Ben put his hat back on his head and entered the house.

From the hall he looked directly into the kitchen at the other end. Emily Kin-

ard stood at the sink, drying dishes. She turned her head as he entered the kitchen and suddenly her black eyes snapped.

"Oh, Mr. Helm," she said eagerly, "Is it true that your wife is an actress? A Hollywood actress. Is her name Helm too?"

"Greta Murdock. You probably never heard of her." Through the open door leading down to the cellar he heard the chug-chug of a washing machine.

"Greta Murdock. It sounds familiar. What picture was she in?"

HE couldn't face her, couldn't make light conversation with her. He said, "I'll tell you some time," and went down the cellar stairs.

Mrs. Kinard was feeding pillow cases into the washing machine. Because of the weather Mark was hanging them on a line strung across the cellar. Beyond the partition there was the harsh whirr of a power saw biting into wood—Mr. Kinard at his workbench. All the Kinards were here in the house, all at work on a rainy Sunday afternoon—a family together.

Ben stopped on the next to the last step.

Mrs. Kinard wiped her hands on a pillow case she had been about to drop into the washing machine. "Is there anything we can do for you, Mr. Helm?"

He didn't answer. He looked at Mark Kinard, who stood motionless with a clothespin raised. His eyes, so much like his sister's, were very wide and shadows crossed the dark pupils.

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Helm?" Mrs. Kinard asked anxiously.

Ben stared at Mark and Mark stared at him. In the other room the power saw stopped.

"Did you say something, Rose?" Mr. Kinard called. "Are you speaking to me?"

Ben said very quietly, "I'd like to see you alone, Mark."

Carefully Mark finished pinning the pillow case on the clothesline. Then he turned and moved toward the broad concrete steps that led directly out to the side of the house. He opened the door and stepped out into the rain.

"What's come over him, Mr. Helm?" Mrs. Kinard demanded shrilly. "Why's he acting so queer?"

Mr. Kinard had come through the partition door. He stood leaning on his crutches. Ben felt himself gag.

"He must have heard a car outside," Ben muttered. "A guest."

It seemed to him that the tall worn woman and the chunkily built cripple relaxed. "He should have put on a raincoat," Mrs. Kinard complained.

Ben moved across the cellar, thinking that this was a hell of a profession he had picked for himself.

18. Mark Kinard

THE detective was coming after him in the rain. His head bowed to the downpour, his shoulders hunched, Ben Helm moved without hurry but as inexorably as destiny. He seemed to know that this was no attempt at flight.

Mark walked on over the soaked lawn. Rain penetrated his shirt. With every step the wet trousers stuck to his knees. The cabins were before him. There was Helm's cabin, as good as any in which to be away from the house and out of the rain. He pushed the door in and passed the foot of the bed and turned. Through the open door he saw that Helm had broken into a trot. Mark passed a moist hand over his face.

He was leaning against the dresser when Helm entered. Helm was panting slightly.

"Did you think I was going to barricade myself in here?" Mark said.

Helm's face glistened wetly. He removed his dripping hat and hung it on the knob of the one chair in the cabin. "I thought you might have a weapon in your pocket, like a knife."

"To use on you?"

"On yourself," Helm said.

Mark considered that in surprise. Taking his own life had never at any time occurred to him.

"I had to get you out of the house, away from my folks," Mark said. "From the beginning you asked the right questions. I felt you get closer and closer and when you came down to the basement and looked at me like that I knew."

Mark let the rest of that fade off unspoken. Better to keep his mouth shut

and sit tight. He pulled a pack of cigarettes and a matchbook from his shirt pocket.

The cigarettes were dry enough in the cellophane wrapper but the damp matches refused to light. Helm dug a matchbook out of a protected pants pocket and handed it to him.

"A cool customer," Helm commented after Mark had brought the flame to his cigarette.

"Cool?" Mark echoed wonderingly. Numb would be the better word. You were numb when you lost the ability to feel.

Helm sat on the chair and stretched his legs. The wet pants clung to his calves. "Suppose you tell me about it," he urged mildly.

All along Mark had planned a certain response if the time came and this was the time. "You can't prove a thing."

"Will I have to? Generally your kind of murderer is anxious to confess. He gets so very tired and there is peace in confession."

Mark's lips clamped over the cigarette. He spread his hands, looked at them, then dug the fingernails into the palms. "You're only guessing."

"Let me tell you something about manual strangulation. It's usually unpremeditated — overwhelming frustration bursting out, an explosion of tension. Few men at one time or another haven't felt the urge to grab a woman by the throat. The one who does it and doesn't let go in time is a murderer. That's the way it was with you, wasn't it?"

Mark drew smoke into his lungs and watched the rain through the open door.

"When I came into the case it seemed unlikely that the two Sprague sisters had been selected at random as the victims," Helm said like a lecturer to a class, "yet at the same time apparently nobody had anything to gain by their deaths.

"These appeared to be crimes of irritation, which limited the area of suspects to those who could be deeply irritated by them. Chiefly that meant you and George Dentz and Tony Bascomb—the three men who wanted Rebecca and had built up terrific sex tensions over her. From the first it had seemed to me that Rebecca was the sole motivation."

"*Seemed!*" Mark scoffed. "In other words, guessing."

INSTINCTIVELY he was fighting back, like a man who felt release from the agony of living in water closing over his head. But at the final moment had to struggle.

Helm ignored the interruption. "Chief Cooperman believed that Tony Bascomb was the killer. He had a certain amount of logic on his side. Isabel Sprague was murdered during one of Tony's brief visits to Hessian Valley. Rebecca Sprague was attacked the day he returned for another visit. Then he stayed on, though he had urgent reason to hide from Beau Bruff and Jean Poole was murdered.

"But the logic could be reversed. Each of those three women might have become victims not because Tony was himself involved in the crimes but because of his presence in Hessian Valley. Because, let us say, each time his return to this town supplied the impetus to somebody else to murder."

"Just a lot of theory," Mark muttered.

"Uh-huh. You go from theory to facts, from a hypothesis to a conclusion. Actually there was a valid reason to exclude Tony from the area of suspects. He could have had Rebecca for the asking and Jean Poole was already his. On the other hand there was an inner conflict raging in him, alternately accepting and rejecting these women, particularly Rebecca, and that built up tensions.

"George Dentz, returning to Hessian Valley because Rebecca lived here, hanging around with only a desperate hope, was a likely candidate. But you headed the list. You who were trapped by your family and your passion for Rebecca. You who seldom had anything you wanted and the one thing that meant most was beyond your reach.

"Rebecca epitomized all women, and your frustration and resentment and sense of insecurity extended to all women. Including your sister whom you were determined to make as miserable as yourself."

"Damn you," Mark said without heat.

"Uh-huh. Damn me. Damn Rebecca. Damn Tony. Damn everybody, including yourself." Mechanically Helm filled his pipe. "That's what I had. Not much maybe—a theory. That's why I used the seems and probablies to explain it. But Jean Poole's murder gave me several things to dig my teeth into."

Mark noticed that his cigarette ash was dangerously long. He started to turn the glass ashtray on the dresser but before he could reach it the ash dropped to the floor.

"Evidence?" Mark said and didn't care now if there was any.

"In a way. The fact was that, better than anybody except your mother and father, you could have known which cabin Jean Poole occupied Friday night. Possibly she'd phoned Tony from Black Rock Inn and told him she would spend another night here—possibly from the road George had watched her enter Cabin Eleven.

"But definitely you were on the scene all along. You said you were in your room, which faces in the other direction, but people leave their bedrooms to go to the bathroom and the bathroom looks out on the cabins."

Ben Helm glanced at his pipe and saw that he was gesturing with it unlit. He applied a match to the tobacco.

"Then there was the question of how Jean Poole intended to get to the station next morning. George says she didn't ask him. Whether or not he was the murderer he had no reason to lie about that. She could have phoned Tony from Black Rock Inn but she was sore at him and it wasn't necessary for her to compromise her pride for so small a matter.

"She could be sure that you would drive her to the station. If for no other reason it was your duty as the host. Now it happens I was sitting on this porch when she returned with George. I was quite a distance from the house and at an angle, so I couldn't see you at the bathroom window. But she was a lot closer and in a direct line.

"If I saw you at that window this morning in daylight you must have been quite visible to her with the electric light behind you. George had driven off and your mother had gone into the house for towels and the guest register. It must have been then that Jean Poole beckoned to you."

Mark said, "You're trying to sound smart. If you were on the porch you saw her motion to me to come down."

"Thanks for admitting it. Actually I saw nothing. Her back was to me and I suppose I wasn't looking in that direction at the moment. I doubt if your mother saw you leave the house and the next morning she kept quiet about it to protect you. She would have been a lot more nervous when we questioned her.

"When Jean Poole beckoned to you you got the idea that it was an invitation to intimacy. You hoped to stay quite a while with her and didn't want your mother to know. So from the bathroom window you watched your mother show her to Cabin Eleven. Then you slipped out of the house to join her. After a while you choked her to death."

HE paused to study Mark's face. Mark was sure that it showed nothing because he felt nothing. His body was sticky wet. He didn't know whether it was from sweat or from his damp clothes.

"It developed," Helm said. "You were the only one to whom it was very important to remain in the cabin with the dead woman and wait until the floodlights were turned off and then remove the body. Likely nobody else would be sure that the floodlights wouldn't be left on all night.

"You knew, of course, that they would be turned off by your mother when she went to bed and you knew you wouldn't have to wait long. Anybody else could as safely have left the body in the cabin and beat it. But that cabin was your business, connected with you, virtually part of you.

"You couldn't drive the body away in the station wagon because somebody in the cabins might see it leave or return. So you carried her, not far, away from your home and your family. Wasn't that it?"

Automatically Mark started to nod. He checked himself. Helm was tricky, building up a scene and then ending with a casual question that almost caught you. But did it matter? He couldn't rouse himself to defend himself. He lit a fresh cigarette.

"Your proximity to the scenes of the crimes," Helm was saying in his lecturing manner. "You were the one who found Isabel Sprague's body. You lived around the bend from Tony Bascomb's house, out of which Rebecca had come only a few minutes before she was attacked. You were at most only a couple of hundred feet from the cabin in which Jean Poole was murdered. Not conclusive, of course, but something when added to everything else."

There was a silence then. Even the sound of the rain had become muted. Through the open door Mark saw that the storm had slackened to a drizzle.

"Still not definite enough to take to court. Not even definite enough to satisfy me completely. That's why I held off, why I didn't spread out what I had to Cooperman and Prince. They'd have piled on you and got nowhere.

"I had to be sure. I needed something to wrap it up. An hour ago I got it. I learned that you hadn't visited Rebecca since the attack on her except once the following morning. You didn't even phone her.

"That was completely out of character for a man desperately in love with a girl who had narrowly escaped death and was in terror of another attempt on her life. After what you'd tried to do to her, you couldn't face her, couldn't bring yourself to speak to her over the wire. That clinched it."

Helm was on his feet when he finished speaking. He tugged his damp jacket from his chest, looked through the doorway at what was left of the storm, then brought his deep-searching eyes back to Mark and smiled affably.

That smile was harder for Mark to take than any of the rest. He pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his face and found that the handkerchief was as moist as everything else on him.

He said angrily, "You've clinched nothing. It's just that I don't think there's anything left for me to save. I go on kidding myself for years, and then suddenly I learn that there's nothing to even kid myself about any more. She didn't go off with Tony last night because of that shooting, but she will. Now they'll be married and . . ." His hand spread and closed over emptiness like the emptiness of his life.

Helm opened his mouth as if to say something but instead he put a match to his pipe.

MARK felt that he wanted to sit but Helm stood beside the only chair, and his wet clothes would make a mess of the bed if he sat on it.

"That evening last September you had a date with Isabel Sprague," Helm was saying. "You didn't call for her at her home because you didn't care for Rebecca to know. Isabel went in for handsome young men and I guess the fact that you were one of her big sister's boy friends she was meeting in secret made it an exciting adventure for her. Did she tell you Tony was at the house with Rebecca?"

"I'd known already. I phoned Rebecca in the afternoon and Isabel answered and said Rebecca and Tony had gone on a picnic. A few days ago he'd come back to Hessian Valley and I was out of it again. Always like that. So I asked Isabel for a date."

"Not because you cared for her."

"I didn't much. She was pretty but there'd been pretty girls in Hessian Valley and in California too. I'd always had trouble getting interested in them."

"In anybody but Rebecca."

"Yes." Mark wondered why his voice sounded so hollow and strange.

"So that night Isabel was only a substitute for Rebecca," Helm said, "like any other woman who had ever been in your life. And something happened to cause an explosion."

"Isabel mocked me," Mark said as if speaking to himself. "After a while I pushed her out of my arms and she got furious. She knew why and she wanted to hurt me. She said she'd left Rebecca and Tony making love in the house. She stood there, sneering at me because I loved Rebecca and Rebecca was making love to Tony. And I—I . . ."

Mark heard his own labored breathing. His fists were clenched.

"You grabbed her by the throat and held on," Helm said solemnly.

"It was only to shut her mouth. I wanted to keep her from saying those things. I shook her." Mark wiped his brow with the back of a hand.

"We all seek physical release from tension," Helm said. "A man will slam his fist against a wall or smash something. This morning you twisted your sister's arm. Last September you held Isabel by the throat and you strangled her because she was a woman and all women represented Rebecca."

"No!" The stricken cry tore past Mark's lips. "I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't mean to harm her." His hands along his thighs pressed against a drawer of the dresser. "When I loosened my fingers she fell to the ground. She seemed to be dead but I wasn't sure. It was like waking from a bad dream. I tried to save her. I ran to Dr. Slesinger's house and brought him back."

"And had a pat story about how you happened to stumble across her body."

Mark pulled back his shoulders. The clinging wet shirt molded his deep chest. "She couldn't be brought back to life by anything I said. It was an accident, like when somebody steps in front of your car."

"An accident that kept recurring," Helm said dryly.

A SPASM of rage twisted Mark's swarthy face. "It was Tony's fault. Why couldn't he stay away? Everything would have been all right. There would still be George Dentz but I think she liked me better. Tuesday afternoon I drove her home from the lumber yard and she let me kiss her." Bitterness stretched his mouth.

"In the evening I walked over to Tony's to visit him if he hadn't left yet and there she was coming out of his house. She'd run to him as soon as she'd heard he was back."

"So you followed her."

"I was going to call out to her but for some reason I didn't. It was almost dark. She didn't notice me because she turned in the opposite direction. I walked after her. It got darker and darker and on Digby Road I could hardly see her. I didn't want to hurt her. I loved her. I . . ."

"But you would have killed her if a car hadn't come along."

"I don't know." Mark's dark eyes fixed on the curved pipe in the detective's hand. "That was like a bad dream too, walking in darkness, not seeing anything but the vague shape of her. All I remember is that I felt sick and shaken with rage and then I threw myself at her." Scowling, he shook his head. "I wouldn't really have hurt her."

"So you say now."

"A few minutes later I was glad I hadn't hurt her."

"A few minutes later. Weren't you afraid you'd try again?"

"I was sure I wouldn't."

"Why?"

"I was sure, that's all," Mark said.

"Uh-huh. But you did. Not Rebecca but a substitute. Jean Poole."

The storm seemed to be over. A patch of sunlight broke through and glistened on the wet grass. Mark watched it through the doorway and was silent. He had talked enough. He had settled all his problems for all time.

"It happened something like this," Helm was saying. "Friday night Jean Poole beckoned to you to come down from the bathroom. When you joined her in Cabin Eleven she asked you to drive her to the station next morning. You'd expected a lot more than that from her. You stood in the cabin with her and all your piled up frustrations weighed down on you. Not Rebecca for you and not even this woman who had at least two lovers you knew of."

"Did Tony have to have everything?" Mark heard himself cry out.

"Uh-huh, Tony. Tony, who'd always been footloose and free to do what he wanted while you were tied to your family and these cabins that didn't even show a decent profit. Tony, who was loved by Rebecca and Jean Poole and could take them or leave them—but for you neither of them."

"Nothing!" Mark said. "For me never anything."

The rain revived with redoubled fury. It pounded the lawn, beat down on the station wagon and the house.

What would happen to his family now? If Emily pitched in to help they could continue to run the cabins. But they wouldn't want to live in Hessian Valley amid the pity of their friends and neighbors. By selling the house and the cabins they would realize a little money above the mortgage, enough to live on for a few years, especially if Emily got married soon. Two old people wouldn't need much.

"Well," Mark said sardonically, "I won't be a guest at the wedding of Tony and Rebecca."

"There isn't going to be a wedding," Helm told him.

Emptily Mark looked at him.

Helm stepped to the door to knock out his pipe. "That's all off," he said. "Rebecca had a dream too, and the shooting last night woke her up."

"Damn you!" Mark said. "You tell me now after I've . . ." He felt his trembling fingers put a cigarette between his lips.

Helm's head dipped to his tobacco pouch.

But it wouldn't have made any difference, Mark thought. He had lost her irrevocably last September when he had made a date with Isabel to meet her at Cream Brook. A lousy rotten accident

had built up to other accidents. Where were those dry matches Helm had given him? They weren't on the dresser and he couldn't find them in his soggy pockets. The detective guessed what he was hunting for and struck a match and extended it to the cigarette.

"Thanks," Mark muttered.

He was so very, very tired. But not afraid. They couldn't hurt him more than he had already hurt himself. Nothing would be followed by nothing and that was all right.

19. George Dentz

THEY were talking about it in the yard. From the office George Dentz saw the truck drivers and the yardmen gathered between the two lumber sheds and listening to Mike Faye, who seemed to have the most information, and was eager to oblige.

On Monday morning the men were generally slow getting to work. It was George's job as yard manager to go out there and break it up. He remained half-turned in his swivel-chair, trying to hear what Mike said and not quite able to. Last night Uncle Frank had heard about it in town but he had returned home after George was asleep and had saved it until morning. He knew no details. Only that Mark Kinard had confessed.

Abruptly the buzz of voices outside the office ceased. The men moved apart without quite breaking up the group and they looked ill at ease.

Mr. Sprague's sedan appeared past the corner of the office. It pulled up alongside George's convertible on the hard-dirt parking area behind the office and Mr. Sprague got cumbersomely out. Solemnly he said good-morning to the men and twisted his ponderous head. Rebecca was coming out through the other car door.

The men stared at her without quite gawking. The bright smile she gave them was a little tired about the edges. As if abashed the men muttered, "Good morning, Miss Sprague," in a ragged chorus and scattered.

George was standing when Rebecca and her father entered the office.

"Glad to see you both back," he said.

Rebecca brought up that same smile for him. There was little more to it than a slight curving of her wide mouth.

"I insisted that Rebecca come to the office this morning," Mr. Sprague said. "It will help her get her mind off—" He removed his hat and looked at it. "She's gone through a great deal."

"Yes," George said, inane.

"Helm will be in this morning. I'll have a check waiting for him. He did a very good job."

There was a sound like a sharply indrawn breath. The two men turned toward Rebecca. She had gone on to her desk. Her profile was static as she took a pack of cigarettes from her handbag.

"Well—" Mr. Sprague transferred his hat from one meaty fist to the other as if not sure what to do with it or with his hands. Then he wandered into his private office.

Rebecca was seated at her desk. The cigarette in the corner of her mouth trickled smoke across her face as she removed the cover from her typewriter. She was dressed in a gray silk blouse and pleated gray skirt, the same outfit she had worn the last time she had been here in the office, as long ago as Tuesday afternoon. George thought that she had never looked so utterly desirable but he always thought that.

"Back on the job," she said, succeeding in making her voice almost sprightly. "I ought to finish typing out the monthly statements."

"Letters piled up, some of them urgent. I wish you'd answer them first."

He gathered up the letters from the wire basket on his desk and went to the side of her chair. As she took them from him their hands touched. His fingers stretched out over the backs of her fingers. Her head turned a little, tilted a little and the smile she gave him was gravely affectionate. Then her hand holding the letters slipped away from his fingers. He returned to his desk.

There had been three, George thought, and now only he was left. He had waited for years. He could wait a little longer now with certainty. He sat listening to the clicking of her typewriter keys.

Next Issue: THE DEADLY WEEKEND, a Mystery Novel by FREDRIC BROWN

Bede brought the clubbed automatic down on the back of Weems' head

design in RED

Alonzo Bede, profound student of crime, finally gets in too deep!

by BARRY PEROWNE

NOVEMBER rain tingled against the tall windows of the club library. In the wan afternoon light, Alonzo Bede sat with his wide, bony shoulders snugged down in a leather chair. His gangling, legs were crossed. His rimless spectacles were thrust up on his furrowed, leathery forehead, almost into his gray shock of hair. Alone in the library, he was reading in a literary quarterly an article written by himself.

Alonzo Bede didn't write for money; he wrote for esteem. Esteem he had to have, if he forced it from his fellow men with thumbscrews. He had been a university lecturer, but such was the arrogance of his intellect and the offensiveness of his manner that no faculty would endure him. Hence, at fifty, since his hobby was criminology, he was reduced to haunting the court rooms.

Once, as the result of a hint he had given to the police in a murder case, he had seen his name in headlines, and thought well of it. But the Police Department had shown no subsequent eagerness to consult him.

The library door opened and a waiter came in.

Looking up over his book, Bede saw that it was the new waiter, Walter Fagg, who had been at the club a week. Throughout that week Bede's mind had been troubled by a sense of obscure associations. Now, his malicious little pale eyes, gray-thatched, followed the waiter speculatively as he crossed to the bookshelves.

The man walked cat-footed. He was tall, narrow-shouldered, with silky brown hair parted at the side, and a sallow, gaunt face. As he reached up to place a book on the shelf, Bede's querulous, nasal voice whipsawed across the quiet:

"Been reading, Fagg?"

The waiter turned with a convulsive grimace that screwed his sparse neck up sidewise out of his collar—a nervous mannerism.

He said, "Yes, sir, I took the liberty of borrowing a book."

"What book?" said Bede.

"The Bridge of San Luis Rey, sir."

"The Bridge," said Alonzo Bede slowly, *"of San Luis Rey."*

Again he had that sense of tentative memory links. The waiter moved to the door. Bede's eyes followed him. As the door closed, Bede unhooked his spectacles, rasped them thoughtfully against his cadaverous jaw. He grew still. For a full minute he sat in a sort of rigor, staring before him. Then he struck the arm of his chair gently, tensely, with an open palm.

"Pettifer!" said Alonzo Bede. "Ye gods, *Pettifer!"*

Rising, he walked to the tall windows, stood staring out.

It would have been around ten years ago that the Pettifer trial had taken place. Charged with the murder of two neighbors, man and wife, he had claimed that he was clairvoyant, that he had detected some kind of cosmic pattern in his victims' lives.

"Death," muttered Alonzo Bede, "as the artistic conclusion of a transcendent design. Pettifer as self-elected instrument of destiny."

IT WAS coming back vividly to him. Accused had talked extravagantly about *The Bridge of San Luis Rey.* He had distilled nourishment for his own mania from a philosophy of benevolent design propounded in a noble book.

"'Eternal rhythms,'" said Alonzo Bede, with rising excitement, "as a dynamic for murder!"

Pettifer had been found guilty but insane. He had been incarcerated in a criminal asylum, and forgotten for ten years. But a month or two back, if Bede's memory served him, a paragraph had appeared reporting his escape: Pettifer, with his clairvoyant urge to terminate people's "life patterns" by smashing their skulls in!

Bede poked his spectacles absently into his vest pocket. He thought of the Police Department, which had neglected him; of his fellow club-members—especially a trio known as Hamel, Colton and Weems—among whom he was as a prophet without honor. Alonzo Bede began to rub his dry, hard palms together, his expression exultant, cunning.

"If I'm right—" said Alonzo Bede.

If he were right, then working here in the club was an escaped homicidal maniac.

The ambulance shot by with a howl under the windows. Its siren went grieving away into the distance. . . .

It was the affectation of the three cronies, Hamel, Colton and Weems, that they were sophisticates in criminology. The precious trio was carelessly assorted. Aubrey Hamel, the actor, had made a reputation in innumerable revivals of "Sherlock Holmes." Alexander Colton, the music publisher, claimed a unique knowledge of detective fiction. As for Roland Weems, *flâneur,* an intellectual trifler whose sole discernible occupation was inheriting legacies from doting aunts, his criminal taste probably was due to over-compensation for a surfeit of female relatives.

For a while after Alonzo Bede's celebrated demonstration to the police, these three had hung respectfully on his words. And nothing had more deeply embedded the iron in Bede's soul than the gradual defection of these cronies. Nowadays, they actually avoided him.

Bede's intense desire to galvanize the complacency of this faithless trio was a definite factor in the vigor with which

he pursued his investigations into the background of the new waiter.

Next morning he sat in a newspaper office with his great shoulders hunched over the report of the Pettifer trial and that of the maniac's escape. Between the handling of the two news events there was a significant contrast. Though both had taken place in a distant part of the country, the ten-year-old trial had rated many columns and pictures, whereas the three-month-old escape had earned but a few lines.

The fact was, Pettifer was forgotten. If his escape hadn't been important news, reflected Alonzo Bede, his recapture here in the city might be sensational.

That night—another night of rain, of monotonous, steady downpour—Bede shadowed the waiter, to his home. He found that the so-called Fagg lived on the top floor of a mean rooming-house, and that a fire-escape zig-zagged down the side of the building to a vacant, boarded-up lot.

Bede licked the rain from his lips.

Just supposing he were a maniac with an inspiration to terminate people's "life patterns," the waiter could descend any night on to the streets, armed with a blunt instrument, and return unsuspected.

Alonzo Bede, turning away along the windy street, felt the hair crinkle, not unpleasantly, at the nape of his neck.

But he told himself that it would be only common prudence to delay any denunciation until there remained no shadow of doubt.

One night, walking into the club lounge, he chanced on the cronies Hamel, Colton and Weems, engaged in discussion of crime novels. Irked by the puerility of their remarks, Bede cut in domineeringly on the conversation. Rapidly his nasal, whipsaw voice took charge. It bludgeoned through every attempt at interruption.

Bede was enjoying himself. It was like old times to him. Whenever anyone rang for drinks, the waiter who answered was Fagg, contorting the right side of his face as he craned his neck up out of his collar.

He was astounded by his hearers' obtuseness.

There now was Colton, his air of ruddy and cushioned well-being accentuated by the girth and aroma of his cigar, accepting in ignorance his glass from a homicidal maniac. The idea occurred to Bede that the waiter might even now be clairvoyantly brooding upon the "life pattern" of these three men—Colton with his gray-fringed, rosy dome, Hamel who bore so sedulous a resemblance to Sherlock Holmes, and the wispy, elegant Roland Weems with his dissipated face and poached eyes!

THE notion filled Alonzo Bede, even as he talked, with a strong sense of excitement. He watched the waiter narrowly, as he came and went, to see whether his glance lingered speculatively upon any or all of the trio. But the man's unbalanced, brown eyes remained demurely lowered. And then, as once more the door closed on the waiter, Alexander Colton violently clapped down his glass on the table.

"Ah, for crying out loud," he snarled, *"shut up!"*

The virulence of the interruption arrested Alonzo Bede in mid-sentence. He stared.

Colton said savagely, "I'll tell you what it is with you, Bede—"

"Yes?" Alonzo Bede said softly, but inside him was a quake of hatred. "What is it with me, Colton?"

"Ah, what's the good?" said Colton, with an alcoholic gesture. "Let it go!"

"Let it go?" said Alonzo Bede. Clawing his spectacles from his mane, he rose, looking down with his little, bitter eyes at the three men. "Very well, we'll let it go. After all, intellectual jealousy is not a profitable subject for discussion." He stabbed his spectacles at his vest pocket. "I blame myself," he said with wry magnanimity. "I see now how it is. You oughtn't to talk to me. Little men like you! I leave you," he said, "to your—cogitations."

He managed to preserve his smile until the door had closed behind him and he was outside the club in the street. It was perhaps as well then that there was no one to see the look on Alonzo Bede's face—no one to see the look on his face, no one to guess the thoughts in his head, the torturing desire that Pettifer should strike, strike, strike again: strike three times!

Thus, at last, Alonzo Bede openly admitted to himself that he knew very well the waiter was Pettifer. He admitted further to himself that, in delaying a

denunciation, he had been waiting for the city to be galvanized by an epidemic of people found with their heads smashed in.

This new idea, that the victims might prove, by some happy chance, to be Hamel, Colton and Weems, opened up alluring prospects to Alonzo Bede. And he was thinking about them, restlessly prowling his massively furnished, gloomy, bachelor apartment toward seven next evening, when the telephone on his desk rang. He caught up the receiver.

"Bede?" said a voice. "This is Weems."

"Weems?"

"Look, I've got to talk to you." The *flâneur* sounded jumpy, urgent. "Not in the club, Bede, and I don't want to come to your apartment. Could you come out here?" He gave an address. "It's my Aunt Alice's house. She's away. I'm here alone. It's a very funny business, Bede! I'll be waiting for you."

"Are you drunk again?" Bede roared.

But the line was dead.

Bede stood scowling, mystified. Then the explanation sprang to his mind. This was one of the waiter's three half-days off a week. Bede, thinking of the fire-escape, knew he had been right in his notion. Pettifer *was* on the trail of the three cronies. And he had started with Weems! Weems must have noticed something to make him uneasy. Probably he was holed up there now in his aunt's house, too scared to leave. In his extremity, he had turned to Bede.

Alonzo Bede rubbed his hands gleefully.

Selecting an automatic from the collection of firearms his interest in ballistics had led him assemble over the years, he loaded the weapon and set out forthwith.

The address Weems had given him proved to be that of a small, attractive, suburban house, well suited to an aunt, with a lawn and trees, and lights showing through drawn shades.

Bede went quietly up the flagstoned path. Reaching the door, he stood listening. No sound came from the house. He rang the bell.

Footsteps sounded within. Hesitantly they came toward the door, paused.

Bede's hand tightened on the gun in his pocket.

The door opened, and there, goggling on the threshold, glass in hand, stood Roland Weems. "Hic—hah!" he said. "Bede, eh? Okay, after all, eh? C'min, c'min!"

BEDE stepped in, irritable with disappointment. "What's going on here?"

"Very 'markable affair," said Roland Weems, who clearly was drunk. "Most 'markable! So you're shtill alive, huh?"

"*I'm* still alive?" Bede said. "What are you babbling about?"

"Thought somebody might've murdered you," explained Weems. He teetered ahead into an easy chair. On a cretonne-covered settee, a blue-gray Persian cat basked smugly. "Make 'self at home, Bede. Aunt Alice gone on vacation. Drink?"

Bede shook his head testily. "Explain yourself," he said. "*Who* might've murdered me?"

He was thinking urgently of Pettifer. But Weems, enumerating with boozy solemnity on his fingers, said, "One, Hamel; two, Colton, three, Weemsh!" He batted his eyes at Bede. "Now we know we can 'liminate Weemsh, huh? Good for Weemsh! That leaves Hamel an' Colton. But you're shtill alive. Good! Have li'l drink!"

"Quick," Bede said harshly. "Talk sense! Are you telling me you three put up a plan to kill me?"

"Don't misunderstand," s o o t h e d Weems, sobering. "It was just one of those nonsenses that are apt to come up after a few drinks. When you walked out of the club last night, Hamel said, 'You know what? Somebody ought to bump that windbag off! Colton took him up on it quick as a flash. 'Right!' he said. 'Which of us'll do it?' An' he took an envelope out of his pocket, Bede, tore it in three, marked one slip with a cross, an' folded an' shuffled them. 'Draw one each,' he says. 'Look at your paper, put a match to it, say nothing. The one who draws the marked slip rubs out Alonzo Bede!' "

Bede's eyes were small and hard.

"You know how it is," fawned Weems. "We'd had a drink or two. Nothing to it, of course—just a gag. Only, when I got to thinking about it this morning, it worried me. Colton—he had a queer look in his eyes."

"He had, eh?" Alonzo Bede said softly.

Weems reached for his glass. "I wouldn't want to be mixed up in anything," he said, "so I thought I'd better be on the safe side—put you on your guard. I'd hate *them* to know I'd spoken to you, so I called you up from out here, where we could have li'l conference. No one the wiser. But I guess it was all just a gag, all right, eh? Heh-heh!"

He tittered hopefully, looking up at Bede.

Bede, gaunt and tall, hands in the pockets of his raincoat, slouch hat pulled low over his eyes, prowled the room, thinking. He had expected, hoped, to find Weems dead in this house—to find that Pettifer, at last, had struck. This revelation of a rumpot charade filled him with a sense of anti-climax. Yet at the same time he was conscious of an opportunity presented to him, of a plan shaping itself shadowily in his mind.

He checked. "Who drew the marked slip, Weems?"

"Search me," said Weems virtuously. "*I* drew a blank!"

"I see," said Alonzo Bede. "I see."

But what he saw, all at once, was his plan. He saw it vividly, to the minutest detail. The very lights of the room seemed to dim before the intensity of the revelation. He felt himself entered and possessed by some irresistible power.

"What a gag, eh?" said Weems merrily. "Heh-heh-heh!"

And Bede, too, laughed. "That's right," he said. "The joke's on me, Weems!" Restlessly patrolling the room, he approached nearer and nearer to the back of the settee. "A drawing of lots to see who's going to murder me, eh?" His great, gloved hand came slowly from his pocket, gripping the automatic, clubbed. "That's a rich one, Weems!" He laughed down at the dandy's balding head. "You had me there, my friend."

Suddenly spitting, the cat shot from the settee—as Alonzo Bede, his laughter freezing on his lips, brought the clubbed automatic down with all his strength on the back of Weems' head.

Weems' laughter froze, too. . . .

FROM strenuously desiring a man to commit murder, it was, Alonzo Bede reflected, a surprisingly easy step to finding one's patience exhausted and committing the deed for him.

The death of Roland Weems, reported in next afternoon's editions, naturally provoked a great deal of talk in the club. Bede, dining alone, noticed particularly the aquiline Aubrey Hamel and the rubicund Colton frowning together at a distant table. It appealed to Bede's sense of the ironic that the waiter who was serving the bereaved companions was the self-styled Fagg, yielding to his usual facial contortions as he respectfully proffered cheese.

Impatient as Bede now found himself to push his plan to a conclusion, his progress was conditioned by the waiter's hours and habits. So that it wasn't until the evening of the waiter's next half-day off that Bede, by a circumspect route, made his way out to the handsome suburban home, approximating to a mansion, of Alexander Colton.

Bede was gratified to find the night very dark. And taking up a position in a shrubbery close to the garage of the house, he hadn't waited long when he heard the sound of a car changing gears. Yes, it was turning in at the gateway. He drew back more deeply into the shrubbery as the headlights swiveled over the manicured gardens. The gravel crackled under the tires. The car slid close past him, into the wide-open garage.

As lights and motor were switched off, Bede, crouching tensely, heard the throb of his own pulse like a drum-roll. There came the heavy thud of the car door closing, then a rattle as Colton unhooked the doors of the garage.

The doors were painted white. Colton's big figure showed shadowy against them as he took his key-ring from his pocket. Bede crept from his hiding-place. The drum-roll in his head was quickening, ominous. His hand went up, gripping the clubbed gun. His teeth clenched, bared. The drums roared in his head. He struck.

* * * * *

The newspaper reaction to the second murder fulfilled Alonzo Bede's most sanguine anticipations. As he sat in the club library next afternoon, studying the press, he saw with satisfaction that the city was at last jolted from its apathy. It was now so conditioned as to take an alert interest in the denouement of what he regarded as unquestionably his greatest case as a criminologist.

That evening the club was a-buzz like a hive of bees.

Putting on his coat in the hall after dinner, Bede saw Aubrey Hamel, with his hawk-like profile and lofty temples, sitting among a group of he-gossips in the lounge. The profundity of the actor's appearance, posturing there with knitted brows and curved meerschaum, tickled Bede. His plan required that one of the trio be spared, and since mere convenience of circumstances had doomed Weems, Bede had had no hesitation in choosing between Colton and Hamel. He had providently elected to spare the one whose intelligence he most despised.

Returning to his home, Bede wrote a brief, friendly note to the actor, inviting him to smoke a pipe over the dire problem of Weems and Colton. He placed the note in an envelope, and addressed it. He knew Hamel's bachelor apartment well, had been there often in the days when Hamel had been one of his admirers.

Unlocking the firearm drawer in the highboy, Bede selected two automatics. One, that on the butt of which the blood of Weems and Colton had congealed, he unloaded with gloved hands and thrust into the left pocket of his waterproof. The other he loaded and put in his right pocket.

It was about eleven when he went back to the club. He glanced idly into the various rooms, saw with satisfaction that Hamel was gone. As for the waiter, Bede knew that the man went off duty at midnight.

Bede timed it well.

He contrived just to be passing the staff entrance of the club as the waiter emerged.

"Ah," said Bede, stopping, "is that you, Fagg?" It was dark here; there was nobody around. "I'm sorry to trouble you at this hour," said Alonzo Bede, "but I wonder if you'd do me a service, and deliver this note to Mr. Hamel on your way home?"

It was an uncharacteristically generous tip that he proffered with the envelope. And the waiter, after screwing his neck up out of his collar to peer at it, said without hesitation, "certainly, sir."

"Be sure you hand it to him personally," said Alonzo Bede. "Thank you, Fagg, that's very civil of you." And as he watched the waiter walk away, he added exultantly to himself, "Very civil indeed, Pettifer, my friend!"

AT A discreet distance, he followed the waiter. And when presently the man entered Hamel's street, turned up the steps of a house on the left, and pushed in through a revolving door, Bede's stride lengthened. He ran up the steps, glanced in through a segment of the door.

Pettifer was speaking to a shirt-sleeved janitor holding a steaming coffee-pot. The elevator here, as Bede well knew, was not operated after midnight; and the janitor, sure enough, nodded toward the stairs.

Hamel's apartment was on the fourth floor. Carefully gauging in his mind the waiter's upward progress, Bede lingered a moment or two, then thrust in through the spinning door. Pettifer had disappeared up the stairs. The janitor glanced out of his lair, and striding across to him, Bede said urgently:

"I'm a friend of Mr. Hamel's. You know me—you've seen me here before. Did a man just come in with some trumped-up inquiry for my friend?"

"H-he said he had a note," the janitor stammered—"to deliver personally."

"You let him up?" Bede thundered. "Then get on the 'phone! Call the police! I'll take full responsibility!"

Turning, he ran up the stairs three at a time. The hand in his right pocket gripped the loaded automatic. His breath was laboring as he reached the fourth landing. The drums roared in his head.

He checked.

Not ten yards from him stood Pettifer. He was in the act of knocking on Hamel's door. He knocked with his left hand. His right was feeling for the envelope in his pocket. He glanced around, saw Bede—saw Bede's taut grin, the automatic clamped in his gloved hand. The waiter's face contorted violently.

Bede fired. The report was thunderous. The waiter spun around from the door, swayed, fell obliquely across the landing. Bede strode to him, dropped on one knee, rolled the man over on his back.

The door of Hamel's apartment jerked open. Bede looked up. The actor stood lean and tall in a crimson dressing-gown, a pipe in his hand, his mouth open.

Bede said harshly, "Get back in there, Hamel! Call the police!"

"Fagg?" the actor said blankly. "Dead?"

"If he weren't," Alonzo Bede said grimly, "*you* would be! And his name's not Fagg! Now, get on the 'phone while I pull him inside. There'll be a crowd here in a moment." Already, doors were opening along the landing.

Hamel turned back sharply into his hallway. Bede gripped the dead man under the armpits, dragged him in, slammed the door, slipped the catch. Hamel was at the telephone in the room beyond, dialing.

Bede, his back to the room, stooped over the dead man. He drew the dead man's right hand from the pocket into which it was thrust. The fingers loosely clasped the envelope. Bede transferred it to his own pocket, took out the bloodstained, unloaded automatic which had killed Colton and Weems. With gloved hands, he clasped the waiter's lax fingers over the gun, so that they held it clubbed, then thrust hand and gun back into the dead man's pocket.

Hamel's voice said, puzzled, into the telephone, "Somebody called in from here already?"

Bede, removing and pocketing his gloves, straightened up, turned. He called. "That'd be the janitor downstairs, Hamel. I told him to call, but wasn't sure he'd understood."

He moved gauntly to the door, looking across at the actor.

"You can tell them," said Alonzo Bede, in his arrogant, nasal voice, "that the dead man is the man who killed Colton and Weems—and who, if I hadn't got him, would have smashed *your* head in, too, the instant you opened that door! You can tell them that he's an escaped homicidal maniac and that his name's Pettifer!"

Almost as he spoke, the sound of a siren, speeding close, came howling up from the street. . . .

November rain tingled against the tall windows of the club library. It was the afternoon of Alonzo Bede's greatest day. Alone in the library, he sat studying the newspapers. They were highly gratifying.

The statement he had made to the police, and later to the press, was a resourceful mingling of fact and fiction. It explained the deductive steps by which he had arrived at a suspicion that the waiter knew something about the deaths of Weems and Colton. It introduced effectively *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* as the master clue to the identity of the waiter. It developed a compelling tension in its revelation of how, trailing the waiter in the hope of corroborating his theory, he, Bede, had been enabled providently to save the life of the stage's greatest *Sherlock Holmes.*

ALONZO BEDE basked in self-congratulation. He had made his name a household word. No flaw had appeared in his plan. Witnesses and fingerprints were being flown in, the newspapers stated, for the formal identification of the maniac. As much a matter of form would be his, Bede's, official exoneration for shooting down a public menace. Already Bede had destroyed the note with which he had lured Pettifer into his trap. So that now, after his long sessions with police and press, he was wholly free to savor his triumph.

That evening he held court in the club. Tolerantly he accepted the homage of his fellow-members, including the chastened and grateful Hamel. To innumerable expressions of a restored and augmented esteem, Bede genially expanded. An oracle recognized and justly honored, he and his domineering, nasal voice took charge of the conversation.

Last to leave the club, he was in excellent spirits as he poked the key into the lock of his own apartment. Surprisingly, the door swung back a little as the key touched it. Bede frowned. Switching on the hall light, he glanced at the lock. The snap was down, holding the catch back. Odd, he thought. He must have touched the snap accidentally in going out.

He took off his hat and coat, switched on the light in his study. He checked. On his heavy desk lay all the afternoon and evening papers, arranged in a neatly overlapping sequence.

Bede glanced around the somber room. He looked over his shoulder into the little hall. He *hadn't* left the door unlocked. Someone had been here. Strange!

He walked to the desk. He saw at once that, in the uppermost paper, every appearance of the name Pettifer was underlined with red pencil.

Bede moistened his lips. That red un-

derscoring up and down the columns had a subtly sinister effect. He became conscious of a foreboding thump in his chest. Who had been here? And why?

Sitting down in the worn leather desk-chair, he switched on the reading-lamp, hooked his spectacles over his ears, lifted the top paper. Around his own likeness, Einstein-haired, forefinger dictatorially uplifted, the second paper, too, was underscored. In all the papers, every reference he had made to Pettifer was heavily noted in red.

Bede thrust his spectacles up into his hair, glancing around the room with its massive furniture, heavy curtains, shadowed corners. The silence was unbroken. His little, hard, gray-thatched eyes slid back to the enigmatic red markings.

Swallowing, he found his throat dry. What was the purpose of this? What was the message it was intended to convey to him?

Halfway down a column of the topmost paper, a sentence underlined with special boldness caught his eye:

Witnesses and fingerprints are being flown in for purposes of formal identification—

Bede sat quite still, a curious notion shaping itself in his mind. Fingerprints —the only *conclusive* means of identification! Those of the waiter hadn't yet been checked.

Bede's hand went to his bony jaw. Queer how quiet the room was. There seemed something almost unnatural about the hush—a sense of waiting. Serene and bright shone the desk-lamp.

Impossible to suppose that the dead waiter was *not* Pettifer the maniac! Oh, impossible! Bede laughed. The dry sound had a grotesque effect in the hush; it made his nerves leap. His imagination was busy with the implications of the idea. His imagination seized it, raced away with it.

If the dead man were *not* Pettifer, then the real Pettifer was still at large. He might be hiding out right here in the city. He might have read these newspaper stories. They might have drawn his attention to him, Alonzo Bede: Pettifer, with his clairvoyant urge to smash people's heads in, Pettifer, the maniac.

Only Bede's eyes moved now, small, deep-set, crafty, darting glances around the room, piercing into the shadows, searching. Intently, he listened. His hearing strained.

He heard the floor creak faintly behind him.

Alonzo Bede's big hands lay open on the newspapers. His fingers began to move. He couldn't still them. They writhed and fluttered along the edges of the papers. Piston-strokes vibrated the walls of his chest. A nightmare inhibition clamped him in his chair. There was a crawling chill along his spine. His tongue clove as he tried to speak.

"Pettifer?" he heard his voice say, on a queer, thick rising note of inquiry. "Pettifer? *Pettifer?*"

HE LISTENED, his head cocked, his fingers writhing. And a g a i n, stealthily, the floor creaked under a footstep behind him. Yet again it creaked, closer. And a hoarse cry broke from Bede's lips, and his scalp crawled.

"No, Pettifer! No, no, no, no! I'll tell them! I'll tell them you didn't kill Weems and Colton! Don't! Don't—"

His hands flew up to clasp the back of his head, convulsively. He cowered, eyes tight shut, teeth clenched.

Nothing happened.

Bede opened his eyes to the marked newspapers, the shine of the desk-lamp. He drew his hands from his head. He licked his lips. His eyes darted, quick, cunning glances from side to side. Slowly, he turned his head, looking up over his shoulder. He sprang so violently to his feet that his desk-chair toppled over backward.

Aubrey Hamel stepped quickly to one side.

The door from the landing opened. A man whom Bede recognized as from Headquarters came swiftly across the small hall into the study. There were uniformed men behind him. The detective came to Bede. A flash, a snap of handcuffs. Bede looked down stupidly at his manacled wrists, then his eyes went to Hamel.

The actor, spare and tall, took out a pipe, began to fill it. The light gleamed on his lofty temples.

He said, "I was slow last night, Bede. There's a mirror over the telephone in my flat. When I was calling the police, I had an impression you took an envelope from the waiter's pocket. I thought a lot about that, afterward. And I had a word with the police about it. I was

there at the time they checked the waiter's fingerprints, and identified him conclusively—as *Pettifer!*"

Hamel set his pipe between his teeth.

"Yes, Pettifer, Bede!" he said. "You were dead right! But I had a feeling it wasn't Pettifer who'd killed Colton and Weems. So I suggested to the police that they suppress for a few hours the news of Pettifer's definite identification, and that we stage a little scene to see what would happen if you believed Pettifer still to be at large. I was prepared to do a little acting, but there was no need. You've told us that it wasn't Pettifer who killed Weems and Colton. In telling us that, you tell us clearly enough, I think, who *did!*"

Alonzo Bede drew in his breath slowly, deeply.

"Now, tell me something," he said. "When you, Colton and Weems drew lots to see who should finish me, which of you got the marked slip?"

The actor's expression was all the answer Bede needed.

He looked at the man he had spared and a strange mirth welled up in him. He couldn't control it. It overwhelmed him. Alonzo Bede glimpsed inscrutable patterns through a crack in eternity, and his laughter pealed.

"There's a Woman-Killer on the Loose—and Only the Screaming Mimi Can Provide a Clue!"

REPORTER Sweeney looked at the black plastic statuette of a nude woman—the statuette he had picked up at a curio shop. It was called "The Screaming Mimi" and it depicted a woman in the throes of horror, a slender woman whose mouth was open in a soundless scream. Ordinarily, Sweeney would have dismissed the whole thing as an oddity—but he knew that the strange killer known as "The Ripper" had purchased a duplicate of this statuette. And had killed the woman who had sold it to him!

Sweeney studied the sphinx-like figure hard and long, for it might hold the key to a mystery. And Sweeney was on the trail of "The Ripper" who had already claimed three victims!

Follow one of the fastest, most exciting manhunts you've ever read about—in a novel that hits a new high in suspense! A brand-new complete novel that probes deeply into the factors behind grim and violent crime.

THE DEADLY WEEKEND

by

FREDRIC BROWN

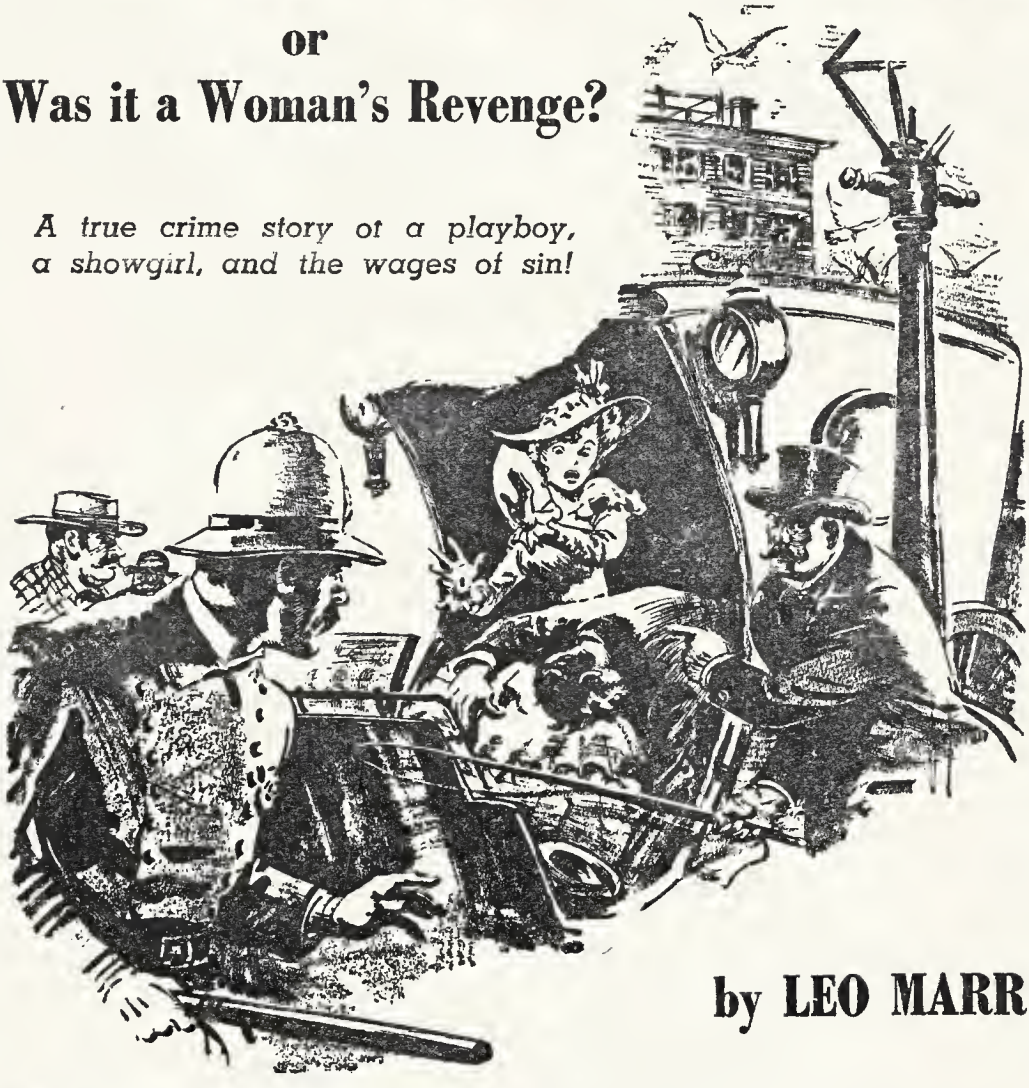
COMING NEXT ISSUE!

DEATH in a HANSOM CAB

or

Was it a Woman's Revenge?

A true crime story of a playboy, a showgirl, and the wages of sin!



by LEO MARR

THERE was once a man named Frank Thomas Young who cheated on his wife. Let's not be cynical and ask if this is uncommon. All we are concerned with in this case is the interesting conclusion that crime either did or did not pay, and you can be your own detective and draw your own conclusion from the evidence which completely befuddled New York in the year of 1904.

Frank Thomas Young was a bit of a playboy. He was English, but an adopted son of New York, an habitue of the race tracks, a gambler, something of a bookmaker, a sportsman, a noted horseman. He was rich, friendly, generous and perhaps something of a hand with the ladies. His success in many fields is perhaps best symbolized by his nickname, which was Caesar. No one called him

Frank Thomas. He was known as "Caesar" Young.

Caesar Young was married. But somewhere around the turn of the Century he took a trip to California alone and on the train he picked up a girl. Her name was Nan Patterson, she was a showgirl from a *Floradora* road company and if contemporary accounts are to be trusted, she was a singularly lovely brunette—tall, voluptuously rounded, pompadoured and—friendly.

Train Companions

There is a cozy intimacy about train travel which condenses weeks of normal acquaintanceship into hours. Caesar Young and Nan Patterson became friends in the crossing of a single state. By the time they reached California theirs was no longer a platonic friendship. They spent several days together in sunny California and this was the beginning of a more or less tempestuous affair that lasted for two years.

Not much space is given to Mrs. Young's reactions to this backsliding on her husband's part. But it is evident that she did not take it meekly and that there were some fireworks, for in 1904, a "reconciliation" was effected.

Either Caesar Young had tired of Nan Patterson's lush charms, or his conscience had arisen and smote him. Whatever the cause, he approached his wife as a sinner, with downbent head, was received and forgiven.

There were tears and joy in the Young household.

"I say," quoth Caesar, "this is just like a second honeymoon. What do you say we take a trip somewhere?"

Nothing could have suited Mrs. Young better. This sudden repentance on the playboy's part might be solid or shaky. The safer thing was to get him out of Nan Patterson's reach as quickly as possible. So the Youngs booked passage for an ocean voyage on the liner *Germanic*, which was scheduled to sail from New York at 9:30 in the morning of June 4th.

The Prodigal Husband

The night before, in a gay and festive mood, the newly reconciled couple had gone to Sheepshead Bay for the races and afterward had dropped in to spend the night with Mrs. Young's sister at her house in West 140th Street. It was a somewhat crowded evening, with all the wifely relatives tramping through the house for a look at the prodigal husband—or perhaps to keep him so busy that he would have no time even to think of "that hussy."

The pier was at the foot of west Fulton Street, way downtown. By seven the next morning, Caesar Young was up and dressed and out of the house.

"I want to stop at the barber's for a shave," he told his wife, "and at the haberdasher's for a new hat. I'll meet you on the pier promptly at nine o'clock."

Beaming, Mrs. Young saw him off, made her own more leisurely preparations and drove downtown to reach the dock about nine. There she waited. Nine o'clock passed into limbo, 9:30 came and went. The boat's whistle gave its last deep-throated roar. The gangplank was hauled in and the *Germanic* edged out into the North River. Mrs. Young stood on the pier, her fingers twisted whitely together, and an icy fear slowly congealing her heart.

Caesar Young never did keep that appointment. He had gotten the shave and the new hat. And in Columbus Circle he had hailed a hansom cab and headed downtown. The cab was rattling along West Broadway and had almost reached Franklin Street when there was the crash of a pistol inside. The startled cabby pulled up in front of a drug store and leaped down from the box. Passers-by hurried forward.

They found Caesar Young, dead, fallen forward with his head in the lap of Nan Patterson, who was sharing the seat with him. These first arrivals were later able to testify that Nan, clasping her hands and turning her lovely eyes upwards for divine guidance, had cried aloud, "Caesar, Caesar, why did you do this?"

On Trial for Murder

They also found a still smoking pistol in the pocket of Caesar Young's coat. Despite which possible evidence of suicide, the State of New York took a dim view of the proceedings and promptly moved to place Nan Patterson on trial for murder.

From the standpoint of the public, this was as good and juicy a murder trial as they had ever enjoyed. The term

"love-nest" may not have been in use at the time, but the implications were well understood. A lovely show-girl, deserted by a philandering playboy, a wife waiting at the pier, a hurried last minute interview, tears perhaps, pleas for reconciliation, a final struggle, a shot, a dying man—hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. Practically nothing was lacking.

Nan Patterson was not an actress for nothing. She appeared at her trial dressed in sombre black, her face pale in the shadow of a wide-brimmed picture hat which effectively framed her melancholy beauty. For even better effect, her old father, impressive in white mutton-chop whiskers, sat with her and now and then patted her hand in silent encouragement.

The prosecuting attorney was William Rand, a rather brilliant lawyer of the day, whose only fault was a certain condescension in manner toward the cruder members of the jury. And pitted against him to defend Nan, in natural contrast, was one Abraham Levy, whose cherubic countenance and innocent exterior was nothing more than a mantrap for the unwary. For the "mighty Abe" was the top criminal lawyer of the day.

The trial got under way with a splash of color that promised well in terms of dramatic excitement. Then, on the tenth day, one of the jurors had a stroke and died and the whole thing had to be done over.

After the inevitable delays, a new jury was chosen, the trial began again. Now Rand went to work on Nan Patterson in earnest. Gradually he filled in that blank space which occurred between the time Caesar Young must have broken off with her and that fateful morning when the *Germanic* sailed.

Evidently Nan had not given him up easily. There had been storms of tears, hysterics, pleas and various tricks including a pregnancy scare which was entirely fictitious. It may be noted in passing that Caesar Young was man-of-the-world enough not to be taken in by it at all. In all this Nan was helped by her sister and her sister's husband whose only possible concern in the deal could have been one of two things: either real concern for Nan's broken heart, or a more personal concern for Caesar Young's well stuffed and accessible pocketbook which was now passing out of their lives.

Farewell Interview

At any rate, it was revealed that they had managed to wangle a last minute farewell interview with Young at Flannery's saloon in West 125th Street on the night before the murder. This could not have taken very long, since Caesar was supposed to have been in the house practically the entire evening. But one of Mrs. Young's relatives, who were keeping him in sight, had gone along and was right on the stage where he could see and hear. To him we are indebted for a transcript of what occurred at the last meeting between the once-lovers.

Nan was tearful, angry, bitter, defiant and morbid by turns.

"You'll never take that boat tomorrow," she prophesied dourly.

Caesar, evidently good and tired of her melodramatics, was unimpressed and inclined to be flippant about the whole thing.

"Do you intend to stop me?" he asked. "You don't even know what boat I'm sailing on." He tossed a hundred-dollar bill on the table. "I'll stake that against a fifty-cent piece that you can't even name the boat!"

Out of force of habit, Nan pocketed the bill. "Caesar Young," she said, "there's not a boat on the seven seas with a hold so dark that you could hide in it from me."

This kind of nonsense began to get on Young's nerves. He tried to break off the annoying scene. Nan hung on. At last he lost his temper. He called her by a name which may have been accurate, but was unkind considering his willingness so short a time ago, slapped her across the mouth and threatened to "knock her block off." Then he stalked off.

Morning Rendezvous

Under the circumstances of this parting, it is a little baffling to understand how they could have contrived a rendezvous just a few hours later in the morning as he was apparently hurrying to the pier in a cab. He had left his house shortly after seven. He had gotten his shave and hat. And he was killed far downtown, just before nine.

It is possible, of course, that Nan was waiting for him when he came out, for

a final try. It is less likely that he sought her out, for he hadn't the time and it is improbable that he would have had a change of heart in the few hours between their parting at about 3 A.M. and their meeting again between 7 and 9.

Whatever the hows and wherefores, the fact is that they did meet and they were indisputably together in the hansom cab when Caesar Young was killed. The pistol which was found in his pocket was alleged to have been bought by Nan's sister and her husband in a pawnshop on 6th Avenue, but there seems to be considerable murkiness about this evidence. Mr. Levy, for the defense, pointed out that if these people were indeed leeches as the State claimed, sucking on the nourishment of Caesar Young's pocketbook, they would be the last ones in the world to want him killed. Though such an argument is open to question, it made an impression. So did the defense's review of Caesar Young's reputation as a rake, which did the state's case no good.

And of course, the prosecutor was working under one additional terrific handicap. That was Nan Patterson's beauty. All she had to do was sit there and look beautiful and woe-begone, and relate how that hound had betrayed and deserted her, casting her off like an old shoe when he was tired of her, and the jury was likely to forget its own names.

The State's principal argument rested with the fact that from the angle of the bullet, the powder marks on Young's clothes and similar evidence, nobody in the world but Nan Patterson could have fired the fatal bullet.

A Skeleton in Court

A skeleton was brought into court and used to demonstrate that Caesar Young would have had to be double-jointed and a contortionist to fire that bullet into himself at the time.

Mr. Levy made quite a thing of Nan Patterson's despairing cry, "Caesar, Caesar, why did you do this?"

"Is there a possibility," asked the counselor, "that within two seconds after the shot, she could have been so consummate an actress as to have been able to pretend the horror which showed itself in her face? Do you believe that this empty—frivolous, if you like—pleasure-loving girl could conceive the plot which would permit her at one second to kill and the next second to cover the act by a subtle invention? Why, it passes your understanding as it does mine. My learned and rhetorical and oratorical and brilliant friend will tell you that this was assumed. My heavens, you are all men of the world. You are men of experience. Why, you would have to pretend that this girl possessed ability such as has never been possessed by any artist that ever trod the boards, not even by the emotional Clara Morris, not even by the great Rachel, not even by Ristori, not even by Mrs. Leslie Carter!"

Mr. Rand, the prosecuting attorney was not too deeply touched by all this.

"I cannot but point out," he said, "that Mr. Levy himself, while no Edwin Booth, nor Salvini either, reads his lines with considerable emotional conviction. It does not require the greatness of histrionic talent, to pretend that something has happened which has not."

The case went to the jury and the jury labored over the evidence and came forth with a disagreement. Which ended the first trial of Nan Patterson.

The Second Trial

The second trial began on the following April before a new judge—Justice Goff—with a reputation as a fearless and stony-hearted avenger of injustice. The case went through the same sort of evidence taking and reached the final summation to the jury.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said Mr. Rand to the jury, "a richer, stronger, heartier man than Caesar Young that morning you shall not find. But the harvest of the seed he had sown was still to be reaped and the name of the reaper was Nan Patterson. And his companion, what were her thoughts? What were her reflections as she sat there by his side? One call, you may be sure, was insistent in her thoughts. One call she heard again and again and again. 'You have lost, Nan, you have lost. The end has come, your rival has triumphed, the wife has won. The mistress has lost, lost her handsome, generous lover. No more riots, no more love with him. He is going back, he is going back. Caesar is going back, Nan, back to his first love, his true love. Back to the woman who had shared his poverty, who had saved his money, who has adorned his wealth. Caesar is

going back to the wife he had sworn before God to love, honor and cherish. Oh, if she had doubts, they vanished then; then she saw red; then the murder in her heart flamed into action and she shot and killed him. A little crack, a puff of smoke, a dead man prostrate on a woman's knee, the wages of sin were paid!"

The case went to the jury again. And the jury took its last look at Nan Patterson's pale and tragic-eyed beauty and disagreed once more.

Tired, shaking his head in despair, William Rand arose before the judge.

"Your Honor," he said, "I move the indictment be quashed."

Nan Patterson was free.

The ink was not dry on the headlines before she was engaged as the star in a new musical called "The Lulu Girls." It had its test opening in Scranton, tried once again in Altoona, but died there despite some rewrites and a new title, "A Romance of Panama."

Nan Patterson then decided she had had enough excitement for her tender years. She too went back to her husband, a husband she had divorced some years before. They were remarried, to the further joy of the newspapers, who took the occasion to rehash the whole case once more. And that was the journalistic end of Nan Patterson. She disappeared from the headlines and nothing further was ever heard of her again.

There was a rumor in the 'twenties that an ancient and slatternly washerwoman in White Plains had turned out to be Nan Patterson. The washerwoman, who was eminently respectable, if slatternly, had no trouble in disproving the claim. Nor did she seem flattered by the mistake. It was, in truth, a little late to do her any good. She had never been in a chorus line in her life.

Ghost Writing

WHEN a person writes on a pad or tablet even with only moderate pressure what he writes in visible form on the top sheet appears on the pages under it in "indented writing." Indented writing, of course, may sometimes be almost as legible as its pen or pencil original. But in cases where three or four or even more pages have been torn off a pad after the original writing, it is still possible to recreate the writing. Technicians, by means of iodine fumes and photography, can make it legible.

Authors of kidnap and extortion notes have thus more than once come to grief even after they thought they had "destroyed" what they had written!—*J. S. Endicott*

There was a sharp crack, and Kim went down

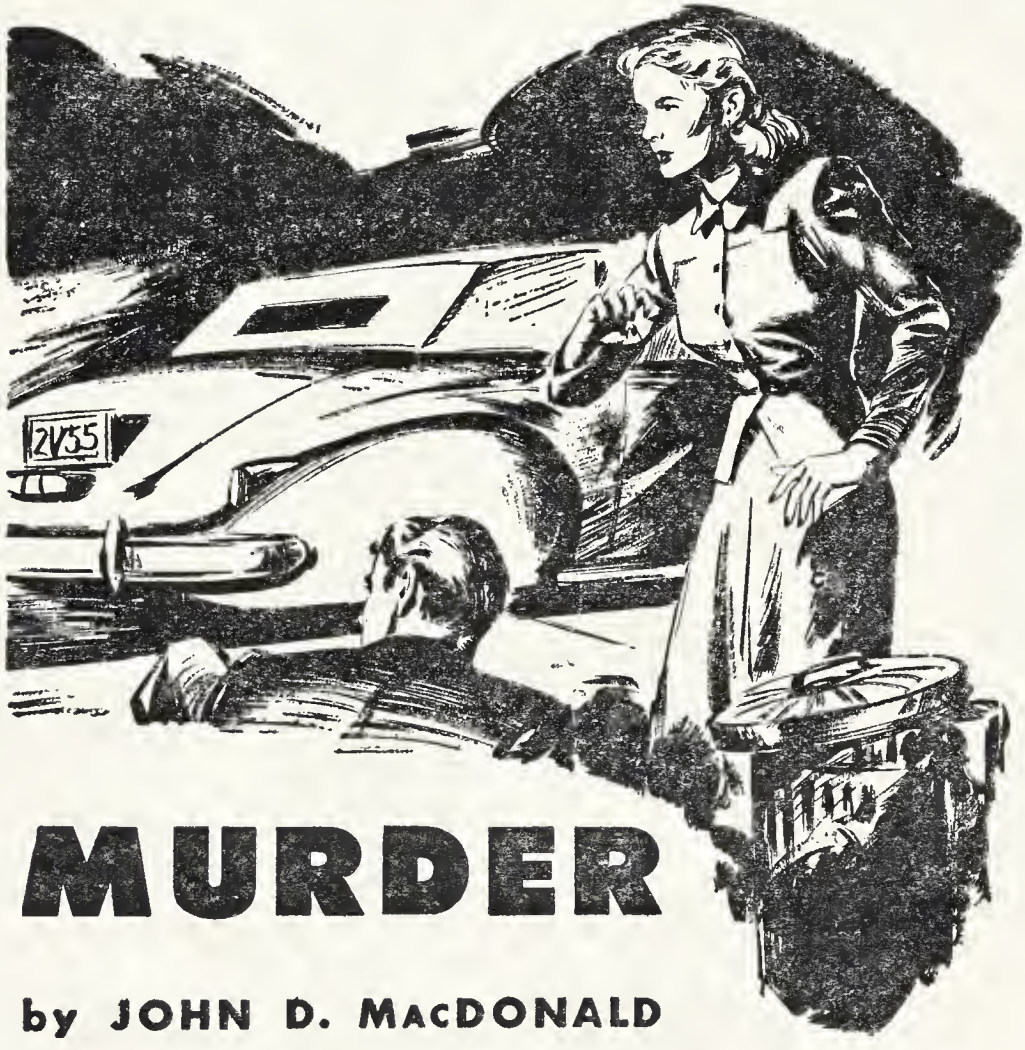
a novelet

BEDSIDE

HE made me want to laugh. If my case of the jumps hadn't been so bad, I would have laughed. Maybe he could have been at ease and charming with college girls. He had a face he could have used to be charming with. One of those Mephistopheles faces, but young and nice around the eyes. Crinkly. It was flattering the way he acted as though I were Helen of Troy, just hurled into his lap.

I had to repeat my name twice before it got by the glaze in his brown eyes. He stuck two fingers under the knot in

Lovely night-club thrush Laura Lynn hires a man with a ready gun, so that when you next see her name in a column, it won't be under—obituaries!



MURDER

by JOHN D. MacDONALD

his necktie and pulled it.

"Ah, yes," he said hoarsely. "Henrietta Ryan." He pretended as though it meant something. The name couldn't possibly have meant a thing to him.

The office was new and clean and small. Kimberly Hale, Attorney-at-Law. No girl. I guessed he used the public stenographer whose sign I had seen in the lobby of the musty old office building on Fortieth.

I had no appointment. I hadn't even phoned. When you have the jumps as bad as I had them, you don't consider

the nineties. I sat in the chair he made the aimless gesture at.

"My friends call me Hank," I said.

He stared at me as though I were Truman and had just asked him to call me Harry. "I'm Kim," he said weakly.

Maybe he wouldn't have had such an extreme reaction to Harry. In my business I'm forced to be spectacular. Nature helped by giving me soft silver hair and smoke-gray eyes—and a figure that I have inadvertently overheard described in words no lady would repeat. I further the illusion with the right clothes and a sunlamp that gives me a tan the color of warm honey.

He stared at me, popped up and adjusted the blinds behind his desk to keep the light out of my eyes. I took my cigarettes out of the red lizard purse and he scampered around the desk with a lighter, banging his leg heartily against one of the desk corners. After he sat opposite me, he pulled himself together again, squared his shoulders.

"What is your trouble, Miss Ryan?"

I puffed a fat and perfect smoke ring which looped nicely over his pen on the desk set.

"Somebody is trying to kill me," I said. "I'd like to assure a—certain degree of failure on their part."

THE remains of the smoke ring flattened out against the top of his desk in an expanding gray pool. There was a frantic note in his voice.

"People just don't come into law offices with that sort of thing," he said. "What's the matter with the police?"

"I think the police are fine. In fact, my father was a cop."

"Then you better tell them about this. I—I wouldn't know what to do."

He was becoming a shade brusque. I relaxed in his uncomfortable visitors' chair, arching my back just the smallest bit. As his eyes began to glaze, I lowered my head, looked at him through the small thicket of eyelashes and smiled.

"Maybe you'd like to hear about it?" I asked.

He tried to say he did and he didn't, at one and the same time.

"I thought of going to the police," I said, "and I thought of going to some reliable detective agency. But I don't want an obvious bodyguard. I'm afraid my unknown friend is a little too clever to be stopped by such a move. I have friends who would help me, but I prefer a stranger."

"Did—did someone mention me?" he asked.

"I found your name in the book. How busy are you?"

He regained his dignity. "Quite busy. I have some estate work and—and—quite a bit of estate work."

I unclipped the purse again, took out one of the five new bills I had picked up at the bank an hour before. A five hundred dollar bill. I put it neatly on the corner of his desk, smiled at him again.

"Shall we call that a retainer?" I said.

He stood up suddenly, turned to the window and shoved his hands in his pockets. When he turned back there was no shade of expression on his face.

"I'm afraid, Miss Ryan, that I'd rather not get into this sort of thing. I'm sure the police would—"

It wasn't an act on my part. The tears were just there. You can fight something for just so long, and then it's too much. They rolled down my cheeks and I knew my mouth was trembling. I couldn't look at him. He handed me a big, white, crisp handkerchief and made small soothing sounds.

After I had blotted up the tears, I looked up. He was sitting on the edge of the desk.

"Suppose you tell me about it," he said softly.

"My professional name is Laura Lynn," I said.

His eyes widened. "Some quality in your voice, the huskiness—"

I smiled through the remnants of tears. "It isn't natural. When I was thirteen I was playing football with the kids on the block and got kicked in the throat."

"All women ought to be kicked in the throat," he said warmly, then caught himself. "Ah—you're singing at the Staccato Club now, aren't you?"

"Yes, backed up by Sonny Rice and his band. I've been there six months and, according to Sam Lescott, the owner, I'll be there another six. I make recordings on the side, do some guest spot work in radio and so on."

"What makes you think someone is trying to kill you?" he asked, frowning.

I caught the faint tone of disbelief in his voice. I dug in my purse, handed

him the bit of paper. He unwrapped it, stared at the small object.

"A bullet!"

"I live in an apartment in the Village," I said. "There is a fire escape outside my window. It came through the window one night on a short visit. I dug it out of the plaster."

He shrugged. "Maybe it wasn't meant for you."

"The curtain was scorched. Whoever fired the gun stood on the fire escape."

He shrugged again. "Some sort of a practical joke."

I stood up so quickly it startled him. I unbuttoned the coat of my navy suit, drew the blouse up out of my skirt, exposing a tan tummy. I pointed a shaking finger at the faint red streak two inches long just below my ribs.

"Big joke," I said. "Ha, ha!"

HE stared at the red mark and then his eyes roamed away from it and he began to perspire. I hurriedly tucked the blouse back into the top of my skirt. His nice crinkly eyes were narrowed.

"Who would want to kill you?"

"Are you going to take the case?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Become the current boyfriend," I said. "Take me around places. Keep your eyes open. I'll pay all expenses and give you whatever you ask."

For the first time he really smiled. "Mother forgot to mention that some days would be like this," he said. "All this and money too!"

"You understand, Kim Hale, that this is purely a business arrangement," I said coldly.

He sobered at once. "Of course. Of course."

"Just exactly how busy are you?"

He glanced over at the crisp bill. "That money, Hank, will keep the men from coming and taking away the furniture."

"Do they do that to lawyers?"

"Especially to lawyers. I trust you're not thinking of me in terms of a bodyguard. I'm not—in practice for that sort of thing. I can use a gun, and I have both the gun and the permit to carry it because sometimes I have to carry negotiable securities around. Should I wear it?"

"I'd feel better if you would, but I didn't expect you to."

He picked up the bill, glanced at his watch. "Now, then," he said, "I'm working for you, Hank. Give me the rest of the story. Whom do you suspect? What other attempts have been made?"

"I'll tell you about the other attempts. That bullet was fired at me four nights ago at four o'clock in the morning. A week ago I was crossing Madison at Forty-second. The crowd was thick. I was in the front rank waiting for the traffic to thin out. I like to hurry across whenever there's an open space between cars. I saw room enough between two cabs. Just as I moved ahead, somebody tripped me. I went flat on my face and it was so close that the right front tire of the taxi smashed my hat and ran over my hair."

He looked at me wide-eyed and swallowed hard. Evidently the idea of Henrietta Ryan with a mashed head did things to his insides.

I continued, "You know the Halloween stunt of balancing a bucket of water on top of a door so that when you open it, it comes down and drenches you?" He nodded. "Two weeks ago I went back to the apartment and found the lock broken. When I opened my bedroom door, I was moving quite rapidly. That's what saved me. I was hurrying to see if all my things were safe—jewelry and clothes. A plain cardboard carton had been put up there. It had a rock in it twice the size of your head. It smashed on the floor so terribly hard it broke two floor boards. The edge of the carton barely grazed my— Well, you see it fell right in back of me and—"

"I see," he said quickly. It's refreshing to meet a man who can blush.

"Those are the only three attempts."

"Does anyone beside the two of us know about them?"

"A girl named Betty Lafferty knows about the rock, nothing else. She lives with me. She's a girl I played with when I was little over in Brooklyn. She's had simply awful luck. She's a companion and secretary and keeps the place neat and does the cooking when we eat in. I pay her a good salary."

"How good?"

"A hundred a week. I gross about fourteen hundred a week from all sources, including the record sales. Betty is a tax deduction. My net after taxes is around four and a quarter a week."

"How about your list of suspects?"

I fiddled with the catch on the red purse. "How does this sound? Suppose I just arrange that you meet all the people who could have some crazy reason for killing me. You can form your own opinions. You can start taking me out. I hope it won't get you into too much of a mess with your wife."

He jingled the change in his pockets, blushed again. "I haven't got one."

"All the better," I said briskly. "Are you busy tonight? Good. Here's my address. I have to be at the Club at nine. The food there is just dreadful. Pick me up at six and we'll eat some place, then you can take me to the Club."

He smiled. "Sounds wonderful."

I then pulled something that I shouldn't have done. I walked briskly to the door, hearing him hurry along to open it for me. I stood so close to it that he had to reach around me to get the knob. When he did, I turned and smiled up into his face. The brown eyes were glazed again and he was breathing shallowly. I was surprised that he was so tall. I'm five nine, a big, big girl. He seemed about six two, with that nice, flat rangy build that I like.

CHAPTER II

KIM HALE, taut and nervous arrived at the apartment at one minute of six. I opened the door and his smile was an expression of utter relief.

"I was worried," he said in a low voice. "I never should have let you go off alone like that and—"

"Shhh!" I said.

I hadn't yet put on my lipstick and, as we walked down the four steps into the living room, Betty appeared in the arch that leads to the kitchen, bedrooms and bath.

"Betty," I said. "This is Kim Hale. You've heard me speak of him. Kim, this is Betty Lafferty."

I saw the questioning look in his eye as he looked at Betty and greeted her, then complete relaxation. Betty is the size of a pint of cream. Rusty red hair, a pert little face and smiling blue eyes. She's just a wee shade too plump and she laughs a lot.

I hurried into my bedroom, gave a last look of inspection, touched up the lipstick, scooped up purse, hat and gloves and went back into the living room. I didn't want to give them too much time together until I had briefed Kim on where and how we had met.

I told Kim and Kim told the cabbie to take us to Lamont's on Sixty-third. Kim looked wonderfully nice. I decided that I never would tell him that he was the fourth lawyer I had gone to, and that I hadn't liked the looks of the first three enough to tell them the story.

Ramond recognized me and, smiling, led us to a quiet corner in the cocktail lounge and said that he would call us when the proper table was ready. I told him we wanted to eat at quarter to eight. He glanced at his watch, smiled again, and walked off.

"What do you think of Betty?" I asked.

"Cute as a button! Very nice."

"Potential murderess?"

"Could be," he said slowly. "Anyone could be. That's the trouble with the world. Smiling faces can hide some very savage souls."

The way he said it, gave me the shivers. And I had had my share of goosebumps during the previous two weeks.

"By the way," I said. "I met you at a party in Los Angeles in early nineteen forty-four. I was singing out there at a place called Jerry's, on Wilshire. You were a friend of Stan Haskell."

"Who's he?"

It's a struggle to keep from self pity whenever I remember Stan. He was *the* one. Maybe he'll always be the one. It seems that way.

"He's dead. Killed in the war. And so nobody can check. Were you ever in Los Angeles?"

He smiled. "I was in Los Angeles in nineteen forty-four. I was at Camp Anza waiting to go overseas. And I heard you sing at Jerry's."

There was a rough and yet tender note in his voice that made me wonder if maybe I should reappraise the shy young lawyer.

"Who do you want me to meet tonight particularly?" he asked.

"Sonny Rice, of course, the bandleader. And Johnny France, who also sings with the band. We do duets once in a while. Sam Lescott, who owns the joint. Carl Hopper, my agent, if he hap-

I was starting down the steps when an unseen sledge hammer caught me in the side

pens to drop in. Donald Frees, my shadow."

"Your what?"

"The little man who follows me around. Hopeless love, he says. His folks hold some sort of plastics patents. He's working up to be a playboy."

I looked across the room and saw Wallace Wint, the gossip columnist, come in alone and take a table diagonally across from us in the lounge. It gave me an idea. I leaned toward Kim.

"Don't look now," I said, "but the disher of dirt is across the way. Wallace Wint. We can get this off to a wonderful start if you want to cooperate. Maybe you'll be able to read all about us in tomorrow morning's paper."

He looked puzzled. "What do I have to do?"

"Don't be so dull! For one thing, hold my hand across the table and look as if you were in love. I'll give you the old melting eye. He'll wonder who you are, after he sees that, and keep an eye on us. Then kiss me."

He swallowed hard, took my hand and, as I looked softly at him, he said, "Darling, you're the most beautiful, glamorous lovely thing that ever came along."

"Hey!" I said.

"Shut up! I'm getting in the mood."

I risked a glance at Wallace and saw his beady little eyes on us. After a time I moistened my lips and leaned toward Kim, parting them just a little. He leaned across the small table. He was very adequate. He was even deft. It took me a good four seconds after it was over to remember why it had happened. I loosened up on the fingernails that were about to punch holes in his hand.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Excuse yourself and go to the little boy's room. I'm sure Wallace will join you."

He left. I sat sipping my drink. Kim came back in a few minutes. He was grinning to himself.

As soon as Wallace Wint left, Kim said, "He came in and asked me if I were John Whitson. I told him no, and he said I looked like John and he asked me if I were an artist too. I told him that I was a lawyer and that my name was Kimberly Hale. Then he said that he noticed I was with you. I said that he was a good noticer. He gave me a

very lewd look and asked if it was a serious thing, or if I was just a fancy passing. He told me who he was. I put one hand against his chest and pushed him a little. I said that if he felt like sticking anything in his column, it better be dignified, or I'd personally print a small personal message on his hide. He assured me that he was always dignified and asked me if a date had been set. I told him he should ask you and if you wanted to confirm it, it was okay with me. He asked me if you'd stop singing commercially, and I told him certainly not."

I gasped. "You didn't overdo it, did you?"

"I don't think so. Tomorrow will tell."

I GOT him a small corner table not far from the dance floor at the Staccato. The place would have given anyone snow blindness, but I knew that it would fill up later on. I had time to sit and have a drink with Kim. Sam Lescott came over. Sam is a balding man in his late fifties with the energy of a man half his age. His features are somewhat marred from the old days when he did a bit of prize fighting in the ring.

"Sit down, Sam," I said. "Meet Kim Hale."

They shook hands. Sam sighed and sat down. He waved a hand at the empty tables.

"Look at the place!" he exclaimed. "Without you, honey, it would look that way all night. Take care of yourself. You're money in the bank for tired old Sammy."

I saw Kim's hand tighten on the tabletop. He asked in an easy tone, "I suppose some of your competition would like to see Laura Lynn booked for a hospital instead of the Staccato?"

"They wouldn't cry none if she broke a couple legs."

"Is there anybody in particular, Sam, who'd like to see you have trouble making ends meet?" Kim asked. I kicked him under the table.

Sam gave him an odd expressionless stare. "If you're asking if I got enemies, sure. All kidding aside, I just talk like this to make Hank feel good. She's a top star. But there's other toppers, friend. She gets sick and I get somebody else. In this business you got to give the customers top entertainment."

Kim smiled easily. "And you certainly know how to do it."

"I been doing it long enough, Mr. Hale." Sam stood up. "See you around," he said and wandered off.

Betty was waiting for me up in the dressing room. With our usual struggle we managed to get the Ryan figure into the silver gown. The top of the dress doesn't start until it gets way down to here. And I mean way down. Sammy says half the customers come back time after time to see if I'll ever get the hiccups. The rest of the dress fits in such a way that if I ever get a mosquito bite on one hip, it won't be possible to zip it up the side.

I sat and smoked and listened to Sonny's boys ride through the numbers, then the drum roll, the announcement, and I stubbed out the cigarette, went down the stairs and out across the floor, the spot picking me up at the doorway and taking me on out to the mike. Even after all these years, it's hard to remember not to squint into the glare of it. Some juvenile yowled like a wolf, but I kept my smile on and gave them "Old Fashioned Love" in that voice that *Downbeat* calls "low down and dirty."

I gave them a current one, then another oldie and when they clapped long enough, another current one. The spot carried me back to the door, then shifted to Sonny. I threaded my way between the tables and Kim saw me coming. He jumped up and held my chair.

After Sonny finished his special number, the lights came up a little. I could see that Kim was uncomfortable. He wanted to look at me, and yet my show dress was so extreme that he was shy about it. He jingled change, fiddled with his glass and kept tugging at his necktie.

When the break came, I caught Sonny's eye and motioned him over. Kim stood up and I introduced them. Sonny sat down. He is aging and has been aging since 1901. But he fights bravely against it. The black wavy hair and the teeth are detachable. He is fabulously beaten on the massage table to keep the waistline down. He eats bland foods, doesn't smoke or drink, gets all the sleep he can and exercises most religiously.

Sam says that for all practical purposes, Sonny Rice died in 1931, and the current walking corpse is the result of

pure will power. From forty feet away, Sonny looks twenty-three. From twenty feet away he looks thirty-two. From six feet away he looks fifty. From three feet away he looks as though he had been taken out of one of those Egyptian mummy boxes and reactivated.

Most women get to see Sonny from forty feet away. His voice is quick, light and gay—with something in it like the voice of a woman who is laughing while clutching a sodden handkerchief and mopping at her eyes.

"How do you like the show?" he asked eagerly.

"Your music is splendid!" Kim said gravely. "Youthful."

Sonny couldn't have been more touched. "Youthful," was, to Sonny, the peak accolade.

"We work hard," Sonny said joyously.

"Your music brings out the best qualities in Hank's voice," Kim said.

He was heaping it on so thick that even Sonny could afford to be generous. Sonny beamed at me.

"Why, I don't know what we'd do without Hank," he said. "She's tops." He patted my hand. It was like the touch of a dry old lizard.

DONALD FREES came in between shows, a few moments before Sonny left our table. As I told Kim, Frees is working up to be a playboy. His bland, moon-like face expresses nothing but fatuous self satisfaction. His pink hands are always faintly wrinkled as though he had just stepped out of a long, hot tub. He is about thirty, I think, but by reason of his weight he has jowls, which make him look older.

At the age of twenty-five, Donald became heir to a life income of at least a hundred thousand a year after taxes. But he doesn't fit properly into the role of playboy, for he worked for five years after college and got into the habit of it and feels remotely guilty about the whole thing.

He motioned to me to come over to his table and since I resent being summoned like the cigarette girl, I ignored him. Several minutes later he lumbered over, smelling of soap, hair tonic, shaving lotion, a pine and leather scent, shoe polish, deodorant and fine Scotch. Kim stiffened a little and I sensed the instantaneous dislike.

I introduced them and Donald said to me, "Mind if I join you?"

"This is Mr. Hale's table," I said primly.

Donald sighed. "Then you join me, Laura." Donald feels that Laura Lynn is more dignified than Hank Ryan, so he always calls me by my professional name.

"I came with Kim," I said.

Donald's little blue eyes inspected Kim again. "May I join your table?" he asked.

Kim looked him up and down carefully, taking his time. He pursed his lips, smiled pleasantly and said, "Get your own dates, fatso."

It was the first time I had ever seen Donald without his pink complexion. He turned and walked majestically off, his back rigid. Twenty seconds after he paid his check, Sam Lescott came over, a dark look on his face.

"Honey," he said, "Did you brush moneybags?"

"I did," Kim said. "He asked if he could join me and I told him no."

I looked at my watch. "Sam, he'll be back in twenty minutes. Don't fret."

"I hope so, honey. All by himself he's good for enough, and once in a while he brings in a nice party." He walked away.

"I don't care for Mr. Frees," Kim said.

"Nobody does, Kim. But he's harmless. He just breathes on me, and his eyes go soft, and then he asks me if I'll let him buy me a beautiful house in Hawaii or the South of France or Bermuda or somewhere. And he never looks at my face while he's asking. He always looks where my tie clip would be if I were a man."

"His kind of money is never harmless, Hank. I've learned that with lots of money you can hire people to be unpleasant for you."

"Why you old cynic, you! And so young, too."

The rest of the evening was uneventful until, at quarter to one, Roger Blate came in with a small party of sharpies. Roger gave me a look of pure hatred and I knew that it hadn't been his idea to come to the Staccato. I finished my number and went back to the table. I pointed out Roger to Kim.

"There, my boy," I said, "is what too

many people think of when they think of showbusiness."

"How so?"

"Roger Blate was my agent. I was getting a hundred and seventy-five a week and I'd made one recording and I was just beginning to catch on. Roger came to me all excited and told me that he had a new spot for me at a hundred dollars more a week, singing with Jerry Jerome and his band. I took the job and Jerome's business manager thought I was pretty nice. One night he got tight and told me that Blate had asked Jerry Jerome for five hundred a week for my services, which would have given Blate fifty a week as his commission. But then, after the price was decided on, Blate told Jerome he could have me for two seventy-five, provided he'd kick back a hundred cash each week to Blate. Of course Jerome agreed, as it saved him a hundred and a quarter a week, and Blate was happy because it meant he made one hundred twenty-seven fifty a week off me instead of only fifty. And little Hank was the babe in the woods."

"What did you do?" Kim asked. "Sue him?"

"Are you crazy? Some of the little boys on my street in Brooklyn grew up to be on the rough side. They like to help a gal from the old neighborhood. One of them went to see Blate and Blate nicely canceled our contract. The doctors took eight stitches on the inside of Blate's mouth. Then I hooked up with Carl Hopper, who is straight."

MOST rats look like anything but what they are. Not Roger Blate. He has a flat face, like some kind of a snake. I knew that he had Johnny France, who also sings with the band, all hooked up with an airtight agreement. It wasn't my style to warn Johnny. Let him find out for himself. It isn't comfortable to be hated the way Roger Blate hated me.

I finished the last turn a few minutes after two and went from the floor up to the dressing room. Betty never stays, of course, to help after the evening's over. I wouldn't want her to stay. Usually she leaves the small light on the dressing table on.

I opened the door and frowned because the dressing table light was off. I started through the darkness and suddenly stopped. Had it not been for the three close calls, I would have walked to the dressing table and reached blithely for the lamp switch.

A draft caught the door and banged it shut and I stopped breathing and began to tremble. The expanse of tanned skin exposed by the dress suddenly turned into a rodeo for goose bumps. I was a little girl again, standing in the dark—and afraid.

The room was so dreadfully dark that I felt as though someone had their hand over my eyes. I backed cautiously to the door, found the latch and opened it, backing out into the hall.

Bud Mitch, trumpet, just coming by, grinned at me. "Got mice in there?"

"Lend me some matches, Bud," I said.

He handed me a packet of matches and went whistling down the hall. The open door let a little light into the room. I walked cautiously across the floor to the dressing table, lit a match and looked. The bulb from the lamp was on the top of the table. One of those screw-in plugs had been put in where the bulb had been. A six-inch length of insulated wire protruded from the plug. It was bent down and at the end, the insulation was peeled off the two naked wires and they were right where my hand would have touched them as I reached for the switch.

It was then that the moisture soaked through my thin slippers. Somebody had spilled water on the floor. Perfect! Hank walks into her room, stands in the puddle and electrocutes herself.

The match singed my fingers and I dropped it. It hissed faintly when it struck the water on the floor. I lit another match, pulled the wall plug out. When the lamp was dead I unscrewed the thing out of the bulb socket and replaced the bulb. It was only after I had thoroughly smeared it up that I thought of fingerprints. And me the daughter of Joe Ryan!

I shut the door, unzipped my dress, and took my first really deep breath of the evening. I slipped out of the thin sandals, dried my damp feet and hurried into street clothes. I put the socket arrangement in my purse, wondering whether the shock would actually have been sufficient to kill me.

I was able to get out of the place quickly because I have the sort of coloring that in a club the size of the Staccato doesn't demand showgal makeup.

My thick black eyebrows and lashes came that way, making what I think is an interesting contrast with the silver hair. I looked in the mirror as I was ready to leave. Hank was okay, except for a haunted look in the gray eyes and a certain tightness around the lips. I practiced a smile, clicked out the light and left.

I had told Kim to wait five minutes after my number, then pay the check and go around to the side door. He was standing in the shadows waiting for me.

As I walked toward him, smiling, he said, "Fatso seems to be awaiting his princess."

I remembered then that Donald Frees hadn't returned to the club. Sam, my boss, had probably noticed it also and would have a few barbed words to say the next day.

"Where is he?"

"His big fat black car awaits at the end of this charming alley. He's practicing having money by being parked by a hydrant. What is my line?"

"Polite, but firm," I said.

He nodded. "Polite but firm it is."

We walked down the narrow alley.

CHAPTER III

OUR heels made echoing noises in the narrow alley and we came out of the mouth of it into the lesser darkness of the street. It was twenty of three. Donald's car was a black mass that caught highlights on the roof and the hood. He was leaning against it, his hands in the pockets of his dark topcoat.

"Laura!" he said hoarsely as I appeared with Kim.

"Yes, Donald?" I said lightly.

"I want to talk to you!" he said.

"Call me up like a good boy, Donald. We'll have a nice talk tomorrow afternoon over the phone."

We started to walk up toward a cab. Donald Frees took two quick steps behind us and clamped my arm, spinning me around. His big pink face was twisted with anger.

Kim chopped down on Donald's forearm with the edge of his hand. Donald let go of my arm.

"You heard her tell you to call her tomorrow," Kim said. "Now go away and stop annoying us."

Donald swayed and I realized for the first time that he was very drunk. His meaty pink fist floated up toward Kim's face. It seemed to be properly aimed, but somehow it floated right over Kim's shoulder.

There was a small thud and Donald sat down on the sidewalk holding his fat tummy with both hands, breathing hard. The chauffeur came out of the car as though he had been shot from a gun.

I had never particularly noticed the man and remembered vaguely that he had a broad flat face and always looked as though his seams were about to split.

There was a sharp crack and Kim was bent like a bow, his knees sagging. I screamed as he went down. Kim was shaking his head from side to side.

The chauffeur helped Donald up, pushed him roughly toward the car. The wonderful sound of a whistle blasted the night as running footsteps came toward us.

The big black car roared off with Donald, and the lights didn't flash on. The cop, a young one, peered hard at it.

"Got the last number of the license and that's all," he said.

Kim made it to his feet and the officer caught him or he would have gone down again. Kim touched his jaw.

"They ought to prop these buildings up better," he said, "so they wouldn't fall on people."

"What happened to him?" the officer asked me. "Who was in that car? Somebody slug him?"

There was no point in implicating Donald. I gave the cop my best smile and said, "I don't know about the car, officer. This is just a little lover's quarrel."

"Don't give me that!" he said loudly. "What'd you scream for?"

I doubled up my fist. "I don't know my own strength, officer. I screamed because I thought I'd killed him."

The cop turned to Kim. "Don't tell me this dish knocked you flat!"

"This dish, as you so rudely call her, officer, was once the woman heavyweight champion of Atlanta, Georgia."

The cop hitched up his pants, glared at both of us with deep disgust, and walked off down the street, mumbling to himself.

I took Kim's arm. "How do you feel, legal eagle?"

"Polite, but firm. The boxing coach in college told me never to lead with a right. And yet I have the vague memory that the citizen who came out of the car led with his right. What happened to Donald?"

"He probably would have liked to kick you in the head, but the law was galloping down on us and the chauffeur had better sense."

"For a playboy he wants to play rough. Where can we get some medicine?"

"Medicine?"

"Yes, Muscles. My head aches. I need wheatcakes, scrambled eggs, black coffee, toast and marmalade."

THERE was a booth in the back of the small, cheery restaurant. After Kim ordered, I opened my purse, handed him the device I had unscrewed from the lamp and told him the whole story. He held the plug so tightly in his lean hand that his knuckles turned white.

"That seems to narrow it down a bit," he said. "Your unknown admirer is someone who could have had access to the dressing room. I wish you hadn't handled that bulb, but my guess is that whoever unscrewed it was smart enough to wipe it off. Also, despite popular belief to the contrary, a clear fingerprint is a very unusual thing to find."

"So my pappy used to say. Joe Ryan, with the flattest feet on the force. A great guy, Kim. You would have liked him."

"What happened to him?"

"Some eighteen-year-olds with a war souvenir pistol were taking fur coats out of a loft. There were three of them. The old man clumped up the stairs and managed to catch five of the six slugs in the chest. The five slugs annoyed him so much that he shot two of the fur thieves through the head and got the third one in the middle. The third one died the next day, two hours before the old man did. Six weeks later my mother paid a nickel to join Dad. Courtesy of the Eighth Avenue Subway."

He reached across and touched my hand. "Why do you make yourself sound so bitter?" he asked.

I looked down into my lap, hoping that he wouldn't see the tears. My voice came out surprisingly small as I said, "What else can I do? Sing Hearts and Flowers."

"Don't be like that, Hank," he said. "You're not like that underneath."

I looked at him. "What makes you think you know what I'm like underneath? I've consistently lost everybody I've learned to love. The world is a rough little place, and I'm the rough little gal who can handle it."

He took his hand away and shrugged. "Have it your way, lady. Let's get back to cases. Who could have gotten into your dressing room?"

"Betty doesn't lock the door. She locks the closet with my clothes and purse inside and leaves the key under the saucer on top of the dressing table. Both rest rooms are in the downstairs hallway. Anybody could find a chance to duck up the stairs and go into the dressing room."

He thought that one over. "But whoever it was, Hank, that person would have to know your habits. They'd have to know that Betty left after helping you for the first show. They'd have to know that you'd go over to the dressing table and reach for the switch on the tablelamp."

"That wouldn't be hard to figure. It's the only lamp in the room. And anybody could see Betty leave night after night."

"Would it have to be somebody who was in the club as a customer or an employee?"

I thought that one over. "Not even that, Kim. The side door has one of those gimmicks on it that keeps it from closing quickly. Lots of the band boys catch fresh air out the side door and leave it propped open with a pack of matches so they can get back in. The shadows are deep back there. A person could hide in the shadows and wait until one of the band boys came out, finished his smoke and pulled the door open to go in. He or she would have time to get to the door and stop it before the latch clicked."

"Then it could have been anyone," he said in a discouraged tone.

"Except Donald. He was waiting."

"And if he'd done it, it would be a good angle for him to wait around." We sat and stared at each other blankly. He said, "We better get in touch with the police."

I shook my head. "Kim," I said patiently, "if I were a clerk in a store or a stenographer or a housewife, we

could get in touch with the police. But you forget my line of work. Any kind of publicity helps my income. I can see a brighteyed lieutenant snickering and saying, 'And so you figure somebody is trying to knock off the famous Laura Lynn? How much newspaper space is she looking for?' "

"I hadn't thought of that," he said.

"You don't know how hard some of the girls and boys fight for those headlines. From bitter experience the cops would suspect that I had fired a shot into my wall, make a scratch across my tummy, broken my own floorboards and fixed up that gimmick to make it look as if I was the lucky girl in a private electrocution. They would sneer wisely and then be very surprised when I stopped breathing."

"Why don't you risk it anyway?"

"Because that sort of publicity turns into a boomerang sometimes. The smart boys figure that if your agent dreams up that sort of a sloppy script for you, you must be slipping and need a shot in the arm and they stay clear. I want to keep singing at top rates, Kim."

"You might be able to convince them anyway—the police I mean."

It was my turn to touch his hand. "Kim, my lad, I have learned to make the lyrics of moronic songs sound sincere. I have learned how to turn on and off imitation emotion like a kid playing with a faucet. However, when it comes to the real thing I just can't keep it from looking like an act."

"The fact that you can see yourself that way means that you're a pretty bright lass, Hank."

"Pretty, period," I said brightly.

BETTY woke me up and I looked at the bedside clock and found out that it was only eleven. Somebody had rubbed gravel in my eyes and sprayed my teeth with wet peach fuzz.

I peered up at Betty.

"Hank, honey," she said, "that Mr. Hale is here with another man. I tried to shoo them away, but Mr. Hale said that he would personally come in and bounce you out of bed unless I got you up."

She giggled, then got my robe out of the closet. I yawned, stood up, slipped into it and belted it around me. I stuck my feet into the battered fleece-lined slippers I have had since I was fourteen and shuffled, yawning again, out into the horrid glare of the living room.

Kim Hale looked disgustingly washed and healthy and full of life. He had a man with him, a man who was completely bald and had a face that looked nineteen years old.

"Hank, meet Baldy Owen," Kim said. He turned to Betty and performed the same introduction. Then he said pleasantly to Betty, "Shoo!"

The dismissal didn't fracture her grin. She trotted on out and pretty soon I heard her singing and clattering in the kitchen.

Kim said, "Baldy is the man I stood on during the war, when I tromped on his left shoulder, the tank went to the left. When I stepped on his right shoulder, it went to the right—usually."

"Had fallen arches ever since," Baldy said cheerfully.

"And you charming people got me out of bed to tell me about the war?"

"Baldy is my new assistant on this case, Hank," Kim said. "It appears that I will find it necessary to sleep and also conduct a spot of research. During those periods, he will be your constant admirer. And should you meet up with a certain chauffeur, Baldy has my permission to do some amateur dental work on him."

Baldy looked a bit frail. Suddenly the light dawned. I said, "Baldy Owen! Of course! I saw you take Moose Gainey at the Garden a month ago."

"Nice fight, wasn't it?" he said complacently. "Seems I busted a little bitty bone in my left hand on his thick skull. Can't even train until it knits solid."

For the first time I noticed the taped hand.

"How much does he know?" I asked Kim.

"Just that somebody is trying to knock you off in a lot of trick ways, Hank. He isn't going to worry about who it is, just about how it might happen next."

"I've been to so many movies I'm going nuts," Baldy said. "This'll be a nice change. Anybody got a claim on that nice chubby little redhead that let us in?"

"Keep your mind on your work, Baldy!" Kim said.

"Sure, sure. You go back to bed, Hank," Baldy said. "Me, I'll help the redhead. Kim says she works here. I wash a mean dish."

As I was going back to sleep I heard the two of them giggling in the kitchen. When I got up again at two, Betty asked me if it was okay if Baldy had lunch with us. Her eyes were bright. I began to wonder if I had lost Betty.

CHAPTER IV

BALDY took me to the door of Lazardo's Bar at six and, when he saw through the glass that Kim was sitting at the bar waiting, he said, "Owen to Hale. Over."

He drifted off into the crowd and I went in and sat at the bar with Kim, sliding up onto the stool before he saw me coming. He bought me a Martini and told a waiter to bring his drink and mine over to a corner table. The next-door booth was empty so we could talk freely.

I had a thought that I had been working on most of the afternoon and I told him. The substance of it was that with Baldy on the job as well as Kim, I was being so well protected that whoever was after me would slide off over the horizon and twiddle his or her thumbs until the mob scene ceased.

He slowly twisted his glass on the black plastic tabletop. "Maybe yes, but just as probably no. The pixie we're after has been clever up until now. You've just been lucky that not one of his tries has worked. A murderer who goes about it the way this one has is probably a shade psychopathic. Guessing at the type of mentality involved, I'd say that all this protection would be considered a challenge. I have a hunch the pixie would very much like to knife in between Baldy and me and rub you out."

He paused to light my cigarette.

"I've been working, Hank," he went on then. "All morning and all afternoon. I have one or two little items that might interest you. Of course, I didn't meet Johnny France or your agent, Carl Hopper, yet. I worked on the others. Before I forget, did you see Wint's column?"

I laughed. "When is the happy day, lover? Or haven't we decided?"

"What I liked was that business about 'brilliant young attorney.' You know, this case may do me some good yet."

"Get on with the dirt, Kim."

"How did you know it was dirt? I looked up the ownership of the building where the Staccato Club is located. It's owned by two brothers named Zachik. I paid a visit, told them I represented somebody who wanted to lease the whole building. They said that the lease of one tenant would run out in six months. I guessed that they meant Sam Lescott. I asked if he'd renew. They said that he would unless my client could offer a startlingly large sum to buy him off his option to renew. I said good-by and checked Sam's credit. He is more flush than you'd expect. Any competition eager enough to get you out of the way in order to break him would be smart enough to know that getting rid of you wouldn't do it. So, for a time, we'll cross any mysterious business interests off our list.

"But checking the credit of Lescott, I also checked this former agent of yours, Roger Blate. He is in rough shape. When your friends worked him over, they also dropped a few words in the right places and a lot of his business has gone elsewhere. Johnny France is the best client he has left. Last month he had to move out of his apartment. Two ex-wives are into him for alimony and he will probably be dodging a process-server one of these days. He has every reason to hate you, but killing you will not, of course, restore his bankroll.

"Now for Donald Frees. His mother spent a lot of her life in and out of sanitariums. There is always the chance that Donald may have inherited a little of his mother's lack of balance, but it is hard to see what he'd gain by killing you while trying to talk you into marrying him."

I was impressed. "You get around, don't you?"

"You are paying for it, Hank. Eager attorney doing job eagerly."

At the break just after midnight I got Johnny France to come over to the table and meet Kim. Johnny's real name is Juan Francisco and he's a good boy to work with. At times he is moody and at other times entirely too gay, but neither emotion affects his singing. Like most people in our business he has had his lean times, and it has taught him a certain amount of humility.

He was in one of his down moods and

spent most of the time at our table staring at the tablecloth while Kim's conversation and mine floated over his sleek head.

After he left the table Kim said, "Moody kid, isn't he?"

"Up and down. But no matter how happy he is, those big dark eyes of his always look sad."

KIM was waiting in the alley when I let myself out the side door. The glowing end of his cigarette arced over through the darkness and he stepped out into the light, smiling up at me.

I started down the steps, smiling back when an unseen sledge hammer caught me in the side. It smashed the breath out of me and drove me off the steps, the echo of the shot roaring in the narrow canyon of the alley.

I fell on my side, gagging and straining to get my breath back. Another shot sounded—Kim's gun. I heard the slap of shoes against the pavement. My side ached and I touched it with my fingertips, feeling for the blood that should be there.

Kim came back, dropped on his knees beside me. He was breathing hard and his voice was hoarse.

"Where is it, darling?" he asked. "Where did it hit you?"

"My side," I gasped, touching it with my right hand.

The cop who had talked with us the night before came running down the alley.

"Where was that shot?" he demanded.

Kim pointed toward the street. I let myself fall back against the pavement. Kim's quick fingers unbuttoned the jacket to my suit. He pulled the blouse up out of my skirt, rolled me gently so that the light touched my side. As his fingers probed at my ribs, I fainted.

When I swam back up through the layers of darkness, I was on the couch in my dressing room. A stranger, the light glistening on his bald head, was stripping wide adhesive off a roll and taping my ribs.

When I moaned, he looked at my face and said, "Hello, young woman. Exhale, please."

I did so, and he taped me up. We were alone in the room. I could hear voices out in the hall. I suddenly realized I was bare from the waist up, but, as I reached for one of the couch cushions he said, "If you feel strong enough, you can slip into your clothes now."

I still couldn't figure out what had happened. My white blouse and the jacket of the gray-green gabardine suit were over the arm of the chair near the couch. He fussed with getting the tape and scissors back into his bag as I dressed. It hurt to lift my right arm.

"What happened to me?" I asked in a small voice.

He straightened up. "Shot, I believe. At least that's what the policeman said. Your friend and two policemen are out in the hall. I thought you'd rather I shooed them out."

"Thank you, Doc. How much?"

"Ten will cover it."

I walked dizzily over to the bench where I noticed my purse. I opened it up, took out the wallet and looked at it in dismay. There was a ragged hole that went completely through it, and through every bill in it. I found a ten and it was in bad shape. I gave it to him. He looked at it curiously, but pocketed it, picked up his bag and walked out.

Kim, the familiar cop and Danny Geraine came in. Danny hurried over and kissed me on the cheek while Kim looked on, baffled.

"How do you feel, Hank honey?" he asked.

"Sort of beat up, Uncle Danny," I said, sitting on the couch gratefully.

Danny was one of my pop's best friends. He was in plain clothes, and his weathered old face looked drawn and grim.

"What is it they're trying to do to you, girl?" he asked, his big hands on his hips, the hat on the back of his head.

"I was coming out—"

"I've got all that, girl. You got down two steps and you caught a forty-five slug in the ribs. I took the slug out of your purse. A good thing you carry the purse in the crook of your arm, girl. That big slug went through one side of the purse, through both folds of the wallet and then hit your cigarette lighter and cigarette case. Girl, it must have been like getting hit with a ball bat. The doc says you've got two broken ribs."

I tried to take a deep breath. "He's crazy. I've got eleven broken ribs, a broken back and a small fire just under the skin."

"Hank," Kim said, "I saw the muzzle

flash from the shadows about thirty feet from the steps. I fired back and ran toward it. By the time I got to the bend in the alley, whoever it was, was gone. I ran back to see how badly you were hurt."

Danny looked at me severely. "This lad tells me that this is the fourth time in two weeks you've nearly died, girl. Why haven't you been to tell Uncle Dan about it?"

"And be told I was looking for publicity?"

He frowned, then nodded. "Some of them that don't know you might have thought so, girl. But not Dan Geraine. What have you been doing that somebody should want you dead?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, Uncle Danny. Nothing."

He thought for a few moments and then made a suggestion. "Girl, suppose you tell Uncle Dan every little thing you know, and in return I'll keep this out of the papers."

"How about last night?" the patrolman asked. "How about the trouble out there on the sidewalk?"

Dan turned to him. "Son, suppose you trot along and take care of your beat. When you make your report, refer to the report I'll make."

"Okay," the patrolman said sullenly. He turned and went out.

I was beginning to feel better. I stood up and took the cigarette Kim offered me. Danny took the slug out of his pocket and showed it to me. It was large and flattened. He pointed with a blunt thumbnail to one portion of it.

"There's the only place we can get a marking off it to put under the comparison microscope," he said. "There's so many G.I. forty-fives around that it's nearly impossible checking." He shoved it back into his vest pocket and pulled out a more familiar one. "Now this one, this little thirty-two slug isn't so battered. Found that in your purse too." He pulled up a chair and sat down heavily. "Start talking, Hank baby."

AN hour later he had every detail. There was silence in the dressing room. Everybody else had gone home, having tired of waiting around to find out about the excitement in the alley. Dan looked at Kim.

"It was your duty to report all this to the police, Hale," he said, "even if she didn't want it reported."

"I realize that now, and I'm sorry," Kim said humbly.

Dan smiled at me. "You're the daughter of Joe Ryan. You tell me what my next step is?"

"What Dad used to call footwork. Find out where everybody was at the time I stopped the bullet. Eliminate those that have a good alibi. Double check those that don't to see if you can uncover motive. If you find one with a good motive and no covering alibi, try to prove they did it. If you can't prove it, set some sort of a trap so they'll commit themselves."

He stood up. "Right." He turned on Kim. "A good thing you've got a permit for the gun of yours, lad. Now get this girl back to her place." He turned to me. "You've had a shock. You will stay in your apartment until I tell you you can leave it. You will eat there every meal. Stay away from windows and don't open the door unless you know who is on the other side, and even then only when you've got me or Hale here in the apartment with you."

I gave him a startled look. "Hey, there! You seem to forget that I have a job here. Remember? Do re me fa so?"

"Doctor's orders, Hank. You set one foot outside the apartment and I give this whole thing to the newspapers. I can keep it out by telling the captain that it's the only way to keep the criminal off guard."

Kim nodded in agreement. I looked helplessly at him and then at Uncle Danny. "All right. All right," I said wearily. "Take me home, Kim."

When we got back to the apartment, Baldy and Betty were sitting side by side on the couch. They both looked up when I swung the door open. Betty looked a bit rumpled and Baldy looked a bit flushed.

Betty brought in some beer and they listened while Kim told them the full story of the latest attack on me, including the fact that I'd have to stay in the apartment. Baldy and Betty both nodded their agreement with the plan. Kim looked at Baldy.

"Chum," he said, "I think that you should have been sleeping this evening instead of being a gay blade. Wasn't that the agreement?"

Baldy looked hurt. "You misjudge me, boss. I turned the canary over to you at

six. I bought a steak. I went back to my hotel. I went to sleep at eight. I slept until two. Insomnia. I guessed it was about time Betty got home from her date. I called her at twenty to three. She was in. I was hungry. I invited myself over. Okay?"

Betty had been very quiet ever since Kim had told of the attempt on my life. Her usually cheerful and placid face had looked strained.

To cheer her up I said, "Two dates in one night, Betty! You're really getting around."

"Did you leave your window open when you left?" she asked me.

"No."

She turned to Kim. "When I got back from my date, a few minutes before Baldy phoned, I heard a noise in Hank's room. I opened the door and went in, thinking that she might have gotten through unusually early. Her window was wide open and I thought that was funny because three days ago some men came up and put a ventilator on the window, the kind that lets air in without anybody being able to open it any further from the outside."

Kim jumped up. "Come on, Baldy," he said. "You gals stay right here. Maybe they boobytrapped the bedroom."

Betty and I sat and watched each other with wide eyes. After the shot that came through my bedroom window I had had the trick ventilator installed, and I had also bought thick curtains that could be drawn across so that no one could see into the bedroom. Betty had helped me move the furniture around. I had told her it was because I was sick of the old arrangement. Actually, I hadn't wanted anybody hitting the target with a second shot fired by guess through the locked window and the heavy curtains.

And somebody had opened the trick window!

CHAPTER V

IN A WAY, that one little thing frightened me more than even the shot that had knocked me sprawling off the steps. Remembering the fall, I noticed that I was getting stiff and sore.

The living room, which had always seemed so cheery, had clots of dark shadow in the corners. We heard the distant murmur of the voices of Kim and Baldy. Once, Betty shuddered. She crossed over and sat on the arm of my chair. We held hands like a couple of frightened schoolgirls. In a low voice, I told her of the two attempts she knew nothing about. She held my hand even tighter. Her plump fingers were cold.

In fifteen minutes they came back to the living room. Kim had a smudge of dirt across one cheek. Both men looked relieved.

"No fiendish devices, no infernal machines," Baldy said. He sat down and picked up his glass. "As far as the window is concerned, I don't think it can be opened from the outside. My guess is that it wasn't completely latched. There's a catch on each side, just above the ventilator. If only one of them was unlatched, it would give a man a chance to edge up one side and slip a knife blade through to disengage the other catch. They're both latched now. And we've been over every square inch of that room."

"If nothing was disturbed, why was the window opened?" I asked.

"My guess," Kim said, "is that they were in there when Betty arrived and didn't have a chance to finish what they had started."

Betty gasped again. "When I heard that noise, I thought it was the wind blowing the curtains. You mean—"

Baldy patted her shoulder. "They're gone now, lambie. Don't keel over. You're a big girl now."

The color came back into her round cheeks and she smiled shyly at Baldy.

Kim walked over and up the steps to the door. He examined the sliding bolt and chain of ornamental brass, tugged at the chain.

"Strong enough," he said.

"How do we work this?" I asked.

Kim sauntered down into the room, his hands in his pockets. "How about this? We'll shove off now and wait in the hall until you kids get the chain across the door. Either Baldy or I will be back early in the morning. In the meantime, don't open the door for any reason at all. Don't leave this room unless the building starts to burn down. Understand?"

Betty and I nodded in unison. He

pulled a flat automatic out of the side pocket of his suit coat and handed it to me, the muzzle pointing at the ceiling. He sat down beside me.

"This little thing here—" he began.

"—is the safety catch," I said. "And the clip holds eight and the gun is a basic Browning patent."

Kim gave me a look of complete disgust. "Showoff!" he said.

Betty and I walked them to the door. Baldy muttered something to Betty and she went out into the hall with him, closing the door behind them.

"Pause for refreshment," Kim said, leaning back against the wrought iron railing, his face moody. I looked at him with narrowed eyes. I began to tap my foot.

"At least you should make me say no," I said.

At that moment the door swung open and Betty came in, a canary-well-swallowed look on her face. Kim left without a word. I slammed the door and locked it.

"He's nice," Betty said dreamily.

"At least he's cooperative," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, go to bed!"

"Why, Hank honey! You don't mean that after brushing off half the loose dough in New York, you'd get swooney over a two-bit lawyer?"

"Go to bed!"

She giggled and I walked off and slammed my bedroom door. After I had climbed in and after the lights were out, she tapped on my door.

"Come on in," I said. "I'm not asleep yet."

She was in her powder blue robe. I saw the hall light shine on it just before she closed my door. The bed creaked as she sat on the edge of it.

"Are you mad because I kidded you?" she asked.

"For heavens sake, Betty! Of course not! I was just mad at Kim. I thought when you went into the hall with Baldy, he'd try to kiss me. I was all braced to give him a polite no thank you. I must be slipping. His nice brown eyes don't glaze any more when he looks at me. He looks at me like a scientist inspecting a bug."

"Maybe he's worried about you."

"I hope that's it. Or else my best friends better start telling me."

We sat without speaking for a time. Though I ached with weariness and the reaction from shock, I wasn't sleepy. I guessed that Betty felt the same way. I heard the far-off blare of a tug in the harbor, the soft sound of tires when a car went by. Around us were millions of people. A certain percentage would die during the night or the next day.

THERE'S nothing like wondering if you're going to die to help you do a little evaluation of your place in society. I thought of myself in some bright little kitchen in some bright little house. Maybe if Mother and Dad hadn't died I'd be in one of those bright kitchens. Maybe I'd have a kid. The husband would be a cop, maybe. A tall guy. A nice guy. I could almost see him. For some dopey reason, he wore Kim's face.

Suddenly I was homesick for the old neighborhood, the old way of life. Running up the stairs two at a time after school. The cooking smell in the hallway of the flat. The noise of kids at play out in the summer dusk.

I wanted to cry.

To keep myself from crying, I started to talk about the people who had been in that neighborhood. I talked about the old times.

Betty and I had done a little reminiscing in the past. Not much. We'd never had time to do much.

"Remember," I said softly, "the time that Hubey Goekner was trying to figure out what was going on in that pianobox in back of the grill and fell off the roof on top of it."

"Um hmm," she said."

I tried to remember who had been in that pianobox. Suddenly I remembered that it was fat little Betty Lafferty. I blushed in the darkness. She would certainly remember that day. She and Skin Mosher had been in there together, hiding from the rest of us. That was just before her family had moved away, taking her along.

"Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up," I said.

"Why not?" she asked, innocently.

"Well, I guess you had sort of a crush on Mosher." I remembered that Hubey had fallen feet first, busting the boards on top of the pianobox. One of the boards had smacked Betty on the top of the head. She was a kid that I had never played with much. I guess the time I saw her with the blood running out of

her reddish hair was the first time I had ever really noticed her.

"Could be," she said.

"What did your folks say when you got home?" I asked.

"They never found out about it," she said, a giggle in her voice.

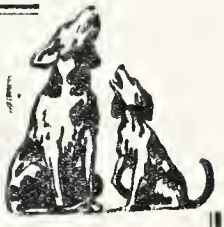
I frowned in the darkness. That was strange. I remembered that her father had walked her down to the doctor's, with her crying every step of the way. It wasn't possible that Betty had forgotten. You never forget the major shears?" I said softly. I had never heard of anyone named Carol Jorgasen, and to my knowledge Betty Lafferty never cut off anyone's braids.

"I sure do," she said. "I caught the devil for that." She yawned and stretched. "Guess I better get back to my bed, Hank. Sweet dreams."

I waited until she crossed the room, put her hand on the knob. Then I spoke up in a tight, strained voice.

"Just exactly who are you? You aren't Betty Lafferty."

The Dog Died First . . .



but after that, a man was found dead—and it all spelled plenty of trouble and suspicion for Dot Hall when the police got wind of the situation in—

THE DOG DIED FIRST

A Tense and Baffling Mystery Novelet

By BRUNO FISCHER

Author of "The Restless Hands"

Follow the strange ramifications of a gripping crime puzzle as a woman is relentlessly drawn into a web of circumstantial evidence because—

. . . the Dog Died First

catastrophes of childhood. Of course, the major catastrophe had come a week later when the truck had run over Mosher and killed him.

"I wonder what ever became of Skin Mosher?" I said casually. I remembered that little eleven year old Betty Lafferty had gone to the funeral two days before she had moved away.

"Gosh, I don't know," Betty said.

It was getting stranger and stranger.

"Remember the time when you were sitting behind Carol Jorgasen and cut off her braids with the teacher's

I could have counted slowly to ten before she answered.

"What kind of a joke is this, Hank?" she laughed and said.

"It isn't a joke. Who are you?"

As she walked back toward the bed, I reached up and clicked on the bed lamp. There was no expression on her usually cheerful face. She sat on the bed again, even though somehow I didn't want her so close.

"I needed a job," she said. "I wanted to work for somebody like you. I went to your old neighborhood and talked to

the people who are still there that knew you. I wanted to pretend that I was from the same section. It would give me a chance to talk to you. By accident I found out about Betty Lafferty. She moved away when she was eleven and you were thirteen. She was killed in England during the war. I memorized a lot of stuff and came to see you and told you I was Betty Lafferty. It worked. Is there anything wrong with that?"

I wanted to be fair. "You could have told me of your own accord, Betty, or whatever your name is," I said. "You knew a month after you came with me that I was satisfied and that I would have kept you on and probably laughed at the trick you played on me. Why did you wait so long? You came to work for me six months ago."

Her face looked doughy, the eyes lifeless and dull. "I would have come to you much sooner, Miss Ryan. It took a little time to find you, you know. Your press releases call you Laura Lynn. I suppose you were trying to hide behind that name."

"What do you mean?"

"I suppose you didn't want to be known as Henrietta Ryan, after what happened. I didn't get to you soon enough, you know. I didn't have the money to follow you to Chicago." Her voice was as lifeless as her face.

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"I didn't want to tell you to your face. But I might as well. It doesn't make any difference, I suppose. I wanted it to be quick."

"You wanted what to be quick?" The fear was like something black and velvety that was slowly beginning to fill my throat.

"My name is Carla Planck. Ever hear of George Planck?" Her lips pulled back from her teeth in an odd grin.

I had heard of the name, somewhere. I repeated it softly. George Planck. Of course! George Planck was one of those fur robbers. George Planck was the one that died two hours before Dad did.

BETTY saw by my face that I remembered.

"He was my brother," she said softly. I thought about it for a long time. George would never do that sort of thing. I was his kid sister. I was by his bed when he died. He told me before he died that he was trying to help your father catch some thieves and your father shot him."

I tried to laugh. "He was trying to make you feel good. His prints were all over the gun he killed my father with."

She didn't pay any attention. "I was glad your father died. But it wasn't enough. The police department told your mother he was a hero. She believed it. I prayed for her to die too. Then I stopped praying and I followed her wherever she went. One day I was behind her at the edge of a subway platform. Nobody would think that a little fat fourteen year old girl would do what I did. That's how I got away with it. She screamed as she fell."

I knew then that Carla Planck was completely mad. Her mouth twitched. Her fingers constantly curled and uncurled.

"By the time I came after you, you were gone. Part of your father lives in you, you know. You have no right to live. For nine years I've been waiting to kill you, Miss Ryan."

I wanted her to keep talking. I was afraid of what would happen when she stopped.

"Why didn't you do it when you first came to work for me?" I asked quickly.

"Because I'd be suspected. I want to go on living. After you die, I can begin to live."

"But if you kill me in a locked apartment, they'll get you for it."

"Not if I open the window afterward, they won't." She smiled proudly. "Those two men think the window was opened once. I planted that in their minds. You have to be clever to kill. I know how to be clever."

It was as though she wanted me to approve of her cleverness, to tell her that she was a bright kid. The gun Kim had given me was over on the bureau, a thousand miles away.

"How do you intend to do it?" I asked.

She looked at me with the dull blue eyes. "I guess I better strangle you."

The fat hands reached suddenly for my throat. I hit her in the face with all my strength and screamed as I rolled toward the wall. I had hopes of being able to get away from her, but then her fat fingers closed on my wrist. She had the horrid, unbelievable strength of

madness. I cried out with the pain, and tried to lift her and lower my head so I could bite her.

The other fat hand closed on my throat, and the world became a slowly swirling pool of darkness. A mile away glass tinkled thinly.

Then I could breathe. There was a hoarse shout, a loud explosion and a scream. It was a funny scream. It was as though somebody had stuck their head out of a moving car and screamed. It seemed to be carried away so suddenly. It ended in a squashy noise.

Somebody was close to me, breathing hard. I felt the faint touch of his breath. I wanted to tell him that it was a wonderful thing to be able to breathe and did they appreciate it?

And suddenly I was kissed. And that, in its way, was just as nice as breathing. So, to make certain that it would last an adequate length of time, I put my arms up and around the neck of someone who obviously had a neck built for the sole purpose of putting arms around.

The lips went away.

"Faker," Kim said softly.

I looked up into his brown eyes. The wonderful glaze was there and I decided that I would become a specialist. I would spend the best years of my life plotting exactly how to put that glaze there and how to keep it there.

Suddenly I remembered. I sat up and tried to ask a question. My voice didn't work the first few times. Then I asked it. Kim sat on the edge of the bed.

"Baldy's phoning your policeman friend, Dan. I had the silly idea that I could trap your visitor by hiding on the roof where I could watch the fire escape platform outside this window. I was up there when you screamed. I made good time coming down. I kicked the window out and came through. She let go of you and raced for the gun. She got there first. I knocked it out of her hand as she fired it at me. She missed. When I went after it, she went toward the window. She might have been all right except that I was waiting on the roof with a piece of pipe I picked out of the trash in front of this place. I left the pipe on the fire escape. She must have stepped on it."

I shuddered. I clung to him, looking through tear-misted eyes toward the bedroom door.

Baldy appeared in the door, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. He looked wryly at us. "People, you are looking at a guy with a defective judgment of the fair sex," he said.

Kim's voice was muffled by my hair. "Go out into the living room and sit down and maybe I'll come and look at you," he said. "I can't right now."

Baldy left.

Kim kissed me. "You make so much more money than I do, darling."

"You shouldn't let a thing like that bother you," I answered softly.

He held me at arm's length. "Bother me! Honey, I was just gloating."

At that moment Dan knocked on the apartment door. Through the broken window I could hear heavy feet and low voices in the alley. The end of fear. Be gay, Hank. Be ready with the quick retort, the bright-colored, billboard charm.

I wanted to say something to Kim that was deep and warm and real and honest. But all I could do was grin like a happy fool.

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the PLAY'S the THING

Whoever would believe that a slow game of chess could lead to the lightning-fast action of a holdup?

I CLIMBED out of the car to stretch my legs and untie the knots in my spinal cord.

"You were pretty near dry," the old guy said. He hung up the gas nozzle and screwed the cap back on the tank. "She took seventeen gallons."

"These long distances out here fool you," I said. "Must be thirty miles since I've seen a gas station."

He squinted at my New York license plate. "You're a long way from home, son. Where you headed?"

"The Coast, eventually. Right now

I'm looking for a place to sleep."

"County seat's down the road about two miles, but if you're figurin' to spend the night there I reckon you're out of luck."

"How come?" I asked, handing him a ten-spot.

"Town's full up on account of the county fair. It's a regular three-day whoop and holler for half the farmers in the northeast corner of the state. Tonight winds it up. You know—cash prizes, band concert, speeches—everybody gettin' drunk."

He started into the station to get change, then stopped and pointed down the highway toward a road that entered it at right angles.

"Fair grounds are about a mile up that side road, where you see those headlights turning in," he told me. Then he grinned. "Don't reckon you're interested, though."

"I'm not," I agreed.

He went in and ding-ed the cash register, then came out with my change. "Me either," he said, shoving some bills and silver at me with a well weathered hand. "Take a lot of vegetables, shine 'em up real good, and stick 'em up on a counter with a blue ribbon tied around 'em—and I'm not the least bit interested. Put 'em on a plate alongside a piece of meat, though, and I'll probably eat 'em, especially if they're potatoes!"

I started to laugh. "You don't sound like you're one of the natives."

That was a mistake. This old boy sure loved to gab, and I had handed him an opportunity he couldn't possibly miss.

"Heck, no, son, I'm no native," he said, starting to clean the windshield. "Used to be a plant foreman back in New England. Got so I couldn't stand the winters, though. Used to catch cold somethin' fierce, one right after the other all winter long, seems like. Ten years ago I decided I'd had enough, so I sold my house, packed by duds, came out here and bought this little old two-pumper, living quarters in the rear. It's no gold mine, but it's a living. And I haven't had a cold in ten years!"

He checked and found I didn't need any oil. Then he unscrewed the radiator cap and reached for the water hose.

"Tell you what, son," he said as he filled the radiator. "If you don't find a place to stay in town you're welcome to park alongside the gas station here and sleep in your car. I'm closing up in about a half hour, anyway, so nobody'll bother you." He screwed the cap back on. "If you see my light on in the rear knock on the back door. Chances are I'll have a pot o' coffee goin'." He hung up the hose, and slammed down the hood. "I enjoy chewin' the fat now and then with folks from back East."

I grinned right back at him, thanked him for his offer of hospitality, and we shook hands.

As I drove away I mentally tabbed the old guy for future use in one of the scripts I'd been hired to write in Hollywood. Within seconds I had Walter Huston playing the part and me winning an Academy Award. I was feeling pretty good.

THERE was plenty of traffic on the road. I must have passed a hundred jalopies of indeterminate vintage, all coming toward me from the direction of town and heading for the fair grounds. They were all bulging with people, some with whole families complete with kids, others with farm hands and their gals, yelling and wisecracking with good-natured rowdiness.

I dodged the ones that were weaving slightly and those that didn't have any headlights, and I soon found myself driving down the broad, well lighted main street of a typical midwestern town. The old fellow was right about it being full up. There were no accommodations to be had. I went into a coffee shop and a tired blonde served me some very tired food. Then I paid the check, bought two packs of cigarettes, climbed into my car, and headed back toward the old guy's place.

It must have been a little after nine when I eased off the highway and crunched onto the gravel alongside the gas station. I killed the motor, switched off my headlights, got out of the car and started around the back door.

Then I saw the dark sedan.

It was parked behind the station right up close to the step leading to the door. I was sure it hadn't been there when I'd stopped for gas earlier. It had an Illinois license plate. I walked around the outside of it and looked in. It was empty. I kept on around the front of it and made my way to the door leading into the house.

I opened the screen door with my right hand, propped my shoulder against it, and was just about to rap on the inside door when I started to get nervous. I turned to my left and took another look at the sedan. Then I looked up at the sky.

There was no moon, but the stars were very bright, and I had just decided that there must be about a million of them shining up there when something very solid collided with the back of my head, but hard. So I got down on my knees with my hands in the gravel and started looking for the Big Dipper. When I couldn't find it I got so mad I leaned over and banged my head against the fender of the sedan and went by-by. . . .

When I began to come to it felt like the Associated Xylophonists of America were holding a convention inside my skull. I was lying on my stomach on a hard, straw-carpeted floor, and when I finally managed to get one eye open all I could see was the watch on my wrist and the leg of a card table. The watch said 9:20 and I was sure glad to know what time it was. Now if the xylophonists would shut up long enough for me to figure out who and where I was I'd be very happy.

The first outside impression to cut through the clatter going on inside my head was the sound of someone groaning. Then a voice like a cement mixer said, "Why don't that guy stop groaning and wake up? You must have hit him pretty hard, Vince. You didn't croak him, did you?"

"Nah, I didn't croak him." The second voice sounded like a finger nail scratching on a slate. "Smart Boy ain't gonna conk out on us, at least not yet."

"Why did you sap him, anyway?" growled the first speaker. "Why didn't you just let him go away? I think it was a mistake to—"

"You think! You think!" snarled thin-voice. "Listen to me, you dumb ox! He saw the car, didn't he? You were watching him through the window and you saw him look at the license plate, didn't you? We got a nice clean getaway car, ain't we? One that nobody'll be able to connect with the job. You want I should let this guy go after he'd had a good look at it? Duke would like that, wouldn't he?

"Give your brain cells a rest, Barney, and let me run this end of it. If his groaning bothers you so much, throw some water on his kisser and bring him to. But keep your eye on him. He's a New York smart boy, remember? Don't let him pull a fast on on you. Now shut up and let me sleep! We got a long time to wait and I got lots of driving to do, see?"

Five minutes later I realized they'd been talking about me. I tried holding my breath. Sure enough, the groans stopped. I rolled over and sat up, and my head began to feel better. So I took inventory. I had Mount Whitney on the back of my head and the Pulaski skyway on my left temple. I put one hand to my face and almost yelled. My right cheek carried enough gravel to start a quarry, and I decided immediately not to annoy it.

I looked around. I couldn't see much at first. The only light came from a small table lamp which had been shoved under a card table. The table itself, a cheap one with folding legs, was against the wall to my right, and the only area directly illuminated was a small semicircle of carpet.

IN AN overstuffed chair in the dim twilight that filled the rest of the room sat a beefy individual in shirt sleeves and overalls, with enough black hair on his head to last another six years. He was sucking on a toothpick and eyeing me speculatively.

"Feel better after your nap, pal?" he rumbled.

"Very funny," I said, fishing in my pockets.

His right hand dipped into the breast pocket of his overalls and came up with a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches. He tossed them at me.

"If that's what you're looking for, help yourself," he said. "They're yours, anyway. Otherwise, forget it. You're as clean as a whistle." It was an unopened pack, and as I struggled with it he went on. "You understand there's nothing personal in all this, don't you, pal?" He let me see part of a gold tooth. "I'd sure hate to think you had any hard feelings."

"Oh, no," I said, "not at all. I'm just a madcap little devil, anyway, and all this comes under the heading of good, clean fun."

He chuckled. "Quite a card. Vince

warned me you were a smart one. Writer, huh?"

"How did you guess?"

"Went through your pockets. Found a letter from your agent."

"Very efficient," I said, lighting my cigarette. It tasted fine.

"You know, pal, you ought to be glad you ain't a great big dangerous guy like Pops over there." He gestured toward the card table. I looked and saw my friend, the old fellow. He was tied to a chair and gagged with a handkerchief. "He almost killed Vince when we first got here. Knocked the gun out of his hand and nearly broke his back before I could get to him."

He spat out the toothpick and replaced it with a fresh one.

"It don't pay to do things like that to Vince," he went on. "Vince ain't like me. He always takes it personal. So what did Pops get for it? A pistol-whippin' from Vince—after I'd got him tied up, of course." He sucked at the toothpick reflectively. "No sir, it don't pay to cross Vince at all."

Looking at the old guy made me inclined to agree. Both cheeks were gashed and there were cuts and bruises all over his face and forehead. I thought he was unconscious until I noticed that his left eye, the one farthest from Barney, was wide open and looking at me. As I watched, it closed slowly and then opened again. At least he was alive and aware of what was going on.

I glanced to the other side of the room and made out what looked like a day bed against the far wall. Sprawled on it, apparently asleep, was a small man with a mop of blond hair.

"Look at him now, for instance," resumed Barney. "Sleeping! At a time like this. I'm tellin' you, pal, he ain't got a nerve in his body, that Vince." He lowered his voice. "He's a brainy little squirt, though. Which reminds me—"

He heaved his big bulk out of the chair and walked over to me. Leaning down and grabbing the lapels of my coat in his left hand, he hoisted me up to my full five-foot-nine and held me there like I was a suit of underwear. With his right hand he carefully removed the cigarette from my mouth, dropped it to the floor and stepped on it. Then he started cuffing me across the face, first forehand, then backhand, then forehand again.

"This is just a friendly warning, pal," he purred. "Just because you're pretty strong in the brain section yourself, bein' a writer and all, don't go getting any bright ideas of writing yourself out of the mess you're in, see? I'm amiable as all get-out, pal, and there's no reason why you and me shouldn't get along just fine for the next hour or so, providin' you keep your nose clean, see?

"Walk around a bit if you want to, but stay away from Vince. And don't try picking up anything heavy, because I ain't the least bit sleepy, pal, and I'll be watching you, see? Nothin' personal, y'understand. But I'd hate to have to tie you up for Vince to go to work on."

He let go and I came down on my heels. Then he backed up, sat down again in the overstuffed chair, and beamed at me.

I took another inventory. The gravel was practically gone from my cheek. He had knocked some of it off and driven the rest in a little deeper. It was not a soothing treatment, and as far as I was concerned war was declared as of that moment.

"Your face is bleedin', pal," said Barney. "If you want your handkerchief it's right there on the table with the rest of your stuff."

I stepped over to the card table, found my handkerchief, and dabbed at my face with it. Then I sat down in a straight chair across the table from the old guy, and began stuffing my belongings back into my pockets. My wallet was shy $750, but $1000 in travelers' checks was still intact. I looked up and tsk-tsk-ed at Barney.

"DID you forget these," I asked, waving the checks, "or were you waiting for me to sign them?"

"Keep 'em, pal," he rumbled. "Too risky. Nice of you to ask, though."

"Don't tell me you staged this whole thing for my measly seven hundred and fifty bucks," I said, knowing darn well they hadn't, but trying to open him up a little more.

"Every little bit helps," he said, making a sucking noise with his lips as he maneuvered his toothpick around. "Pops, here, helped out with the cash register in front and an old coffee pot in the kitchen. But that ain't nothing compared to what's coming from up the road—" He stopped short and turned

red. Then he leaned forward in his chair and glared at me. "You sure got a way with you, ain't you, pal?" he growled. "Pretty near had me spillin' my whole life's history, didn't you?" He looked dangerous for a minute and then sank back into the chair, clamping his mouth shut and looking like he was determined to keep it that way.

But I was figuring fast and I thought now I knew some of the answers. These thugs and their partner or partners were sticking up the county fair. As I doped it out, Duke, the one Vince had mentioned before, was pulling the actual hold-up, maybe with a fourth member of the gang. Several hundred people would be able to describe them and the car they used. But if they could make a quick dash down the side road for the old fellow's gas station and get there before their pursuers were actually on their tails, they stood a good chance of getting clear of the law entirely by ditching the hot car here and driving away in the dark sedan.

Vince and Barney were already wearing overalls. When the other two got here they, too, could switch to overalls, and then Duke and his gang would merely be four farm hands in an unknown car getting conveniently lost among the home-going crowds of farmers and their families. It was just nutty enough to stand a good chance of succeeding!

Also, it began to look like a very quiet winter for the old man and me, since we were the only ones who could finger the boys. From what I'd heard of Vince, he would not hesitate to close our mouths permanently if the take made it worth while.

I put away the wallet and picked up from the table the last item belonging to me. It was a pocket chess set, one of those folding ones made of leather, with little celluloid men that tuck into slits. I held it in the light of the lamp under the table and put on a great show of counting the men. I didn't want Barney to stay frozen up.

Sure enough, he stood it as long as he could and then wanted some information.

"Say, what is that thing, anyway?"

It never fails. I guess every chess player has been asked that question a dozen times. Curiosity just naturally gets the better of any non-chessplayer who glimpses one of those things for the first time.

I told him what it was.

He made some of the customary remarks, things like: "that must be quite a game," "never could get interested in it myself," "takes two or three hours to make one move, don't it?", and then we hit upon the subject of playing chess by mail. He didn't see how that was possible. I explained. He tsk-tsk-ed and wondered what'll they think of next. Then we were interrupted by the old guy.

He was coughing, although with that gag in his mouth it was more like strangling. His shoulders were heaving and his face got red, then purple.

I looked at Barney. He was staring with narrow eyes. Then he looked over his shoulder in the direction of the day bed. Vince's snores were of no help, so he turned back.

"Well?" I said. "You going to let him die, or shall I loosen the gag?"

He nodded.

After about ten seconds of fast fumbling with the knot I had the gag off and the old fellow was gasping for breath. In a little while words began to come out.

"—whew—thought I was all over that cold. All of a sudden my nose stuffed up—couldn't breathe—started coughing at the same time." There was an unmistakable gleam in his eye now as he looked at me. "I think I got a chest cold."

He was trying to tell me something but my brain wouldn't turn up a thing.

"Okay, Pops," Barney growled, "can the chatter. Don't try tipping off my brainy pal, here, to anything, see? Maybe you got another rod stashed someplace. Vince wouldn't like it a bit if he knew you weren't gagged, so you better shut up or I'll have to wake him up and let him handle you."

I STARTED thinking again about what the old chap had said when the gag came off and how he had said it. I went over everything word for word. Suddenly I had it! It was so simple I almost laughed out loud. He didn't have any cold! He'd told me not two hours before that he hadn't had a cold in ten years!

But he had *talked* like he had one, and the words had come out something like this: "—by doze stuffed up—coffig at

the sabe tibe—" and then the punch line, "I thig I got a ches' code." He had told me what he wanted to tell me, disguised in such a way that Barney would assume he was saying something entirely different! He had figured out a way to tip me off to something by using the game of chess. A *chess code!*

I wondered how much time we had. Was there time enough for at least a short game of chess? How could he communicate with me by a chess code unless it was over a chess board with a game going on?

I let go with a cavernous yawn. "You guys going to be here all night?" I asked. "I'd sure like to get some sleep."

"Don't worry, pal," Barney said. "Vince'll see that you get your sleep." His voice had a definite edge.

"I sure hope so," I went on in my best babe-in-the-woods manner. "I drove about fifteen hours today, so perhaps you won't mind my saying it's been swell having you and won't you drop in again sometime? We have open house every Saturday night."

He chuckled appreciatively. "Nice going, pal," he said. "I like your chatter. It ain't often I get entertained like this on a job."

I decided to get wet all over. "Speaking of entertainment," I said, "did you ever watch a good chess game?"

"Are you kidding?" He looked affronted at the mere suggestion. "A couple of guys sitting across a table holding up their chins?"

"That's where you're wrong," I said. "You've just never had it explained to you as it went along. In some European countries they go just as crazy over chess as we do here over baseball."

"Is 'at a fact?" He took the toothpick out of his mouth and examined the end of it intently. Then he looked at me and said, "Okay, pal, okay. So I just can't wait to see a chess game. Where do I find one?"

I shrugged. "I don't know—right here, maybe. That is, if you'll let me and the old man play a game."

There was a sharp intake of breath from the old guy as I said this, and almost in the same instant I realized I'd made a mistake. My eyes began feverishly searching the room for something to cover up with in case Barney caught on.

"Why not?" Barney was saying. "You should have thought of it sooner. I told you I'm amiable as all get-out. I can keep an eye on you just as easy while you're playing chess as—" His voice trailed off. Then he sat bolt upright and squinted his eyes at me. "Listen, pal," he growled. "How did you know Pops was a chess player?"

Just as he said it I thought I saw what I was looking for. The bottom shelf of a low end table beside Barney's chair was jammed with magazines. One of them, sticking out a little beyond the others, had a red corner on the cover with white lettering on it. As near as I could tell in the darkness it looked like the one I wanted. I breathed a silent prayer and stood up.

"It didn't take much brain power to figure that out," I said, in answer to his question. Then I walked straight to the end table, yanked the magazine out of the pile, took one glance at it, and tossed it into his lap. "When I see a copy of this staring me in the face," I said, "I know I'm in the home of a chess player." It was a copy of the Chess Review, a magazine devoted exclusively to the game.

Then I walked back to my chair, giving the old guy a big wink on the way. He looked almost happy. I guess Barney was satisfied, too.

"Look, Pops," he said softly, leaning forward is his chair. "My pal, here, wants to play chess. I figure it'll keep him out of mischief, see? Go ahead. Amaze me."

I had been looking for the chess equipment, and now I spotted the customary smooth brown box resting on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. I pointed it out to Barney. He let me get it, but made me bring him the box so that he could open it and make sure it contained nothing more deadly than chessmen.

I took the set to the table. "It's sort of dark here," I said. "Can we get a little more light?"

BARNEY looked over his shoulder to make sure his chair would shield the lamp light from Vince.

"Take the lamp real careful-like, pal, and move it out from under the table," he said.

I got hold of the lamp and moved it out as far as the cord would reach. As I began setting up the men I realized we had another problem. I nodded to-

ward the old guy.

"How's he supposed to play without hands?" I asked.

Barney sucked on his toothpick for a second. Then he reached to his hip pocket and pulled out a forty-five automatic. He checked it carefully and laid it down on the end table beside him.

"Untie his arms," he said, "real careful-like, pal."

It was quite a struggle getting the knots undone. The old man's big wrists were raw where the ropes had cut into them. He flexed his fingers and rubbed his arms to get the circulation going again while I finished setting up the men.

"Remember," Barney said to him. "No "No talk out of you at all, see? Don't let your hands hide your mouth and don't move your lips. I might misunderstand, get me?"

The old guy nodded.

"It's all right if he says 'check' now and then, isn't it?" I said.

"What for?"

"Part of the game."

"Okay, but nothin' else."

We began to play. That game should have been recorded for posterity as an example of sheer lunacy! The first few moves were okay. Then the old fellow took one of his bishops from a black square, hopped it over one of his own pawns, and set it down on a white square. If I hadn't been ready for almost anything, that would have been as startling as a well placed red-hot poker. Bishops just don't act like that, so I knew he had started sending. I couldn't find any hidden meaning in the move itself, so I merely continued to play, keeping my eyes open at the same time for more wrong moves.

All this time, in order to impress Barney with how exciting it all was, I was keeping up a running patter of double-talk that would have put a radio announcer to shame. Naturally, he had almost no idea of what I was talking about, but he seemed to be watching it all with interest, and I had the satisfaction of getting a couple of grunts out of him.

Then the old guy castled. Castling is a double move in chess performed with two men at once, the king and the rook, and it can only be done only according to certain very definite rules. He had done a fantastic job of breaking practically every rule on the subject. So far, so good.

A few moves later he shoved his king two squares to the left. Uh-uh. No can do. The king never moves more than one square at a time. When he completed this move he said, "Check?" with a rising inflection.

Now there's never any question about being "in check." It is announced as a fact, not as a query. He was simply letting me know that I should have gotten something out of it by now.

The game continued with no more wrong moves. As I kept up my line of chatter for Barney's benefit I was racking my brain trying to make sense out of a bishop and a castle and a king, his three wrong moves. I couldn't get anywhere. Then I thought of the symbols that are used in putting a game of chess down on paper, and I knew I had it! The symbols for bishop and king are simply "B" and "K," respectively. But the one for castling is "O—O," and that made quite a difference! Thinking of them in the order in which he had made the moves I got "B, O—O, K," and that spells BOOK in anybody's language!

I said "check" after my next move, to let him know I had latched on. Then I looked past his right shoulder at the bookcase over against the wall. It was a small one, but it must have contained well over a hundred books. Most of them of the twenty-five cent paper-covered variety, but twenty or thirty were regular cloth-bound volumes.

What was I supposed to do, walk over, grab one, and throw it at Barney? I began to have a wild hope that he really was guiding me to a gun. What else could get us out of this mess with our skins intact? Well, if it were a gun it was probably behind the book, I figured, so I looked down at the board a second then up at the old guy.

"Looks like you're a little bit behind. doesn't it?" I said.

Now a chess game is a battle, not a race. You might say you were *behind in material* if your opponent had captured several of your pieces, but using the word as I had would seem slightly asinine to an experienced chess player. However, he smiled, and started removing the pieces from the board and putting them in the box.

"What's that for?" rumbled Barney.

"He's resigning the game," I said.

"If you know you're beaten you don't generally bother to finish it out."

"You mean it's over?" He flicked his toothpick to the floor. "Heck, I've seen checker games that lasted longer than that, pal."

I PAID no attention to him. I was too busy being amazed at how little it took to make me happy! All I knew was that there was something behind a book, and I was tickled to death.

The old guy coughed again, real hard.

I looked at the board. He had put all the white men back in the box and only the black pieces remained on the playing surface. Things were looking rosier by the minute. He went on putting the men away, and then, when they were all in the box except the black king, he went into another one of his phony coughing spells. I mopped my forehead with my handkerchief. Life was within reach! Now if I could only be sure it was really a gun!

One more asinine remark from me was called for. Picking up the black king, I looked at it admiringly.

"This is a mighty swell set," I said. "Good, solid pieces." I looked at the old guy. Our eyes met and held. "They must be loaded with lead," I said, as if I'd never seen a set like it before!"

He nodded. That did it! I dropped the king in the box and closed the cover. Then my insides congealed.

From the other side of the room I could hear Vince stirring. He babbled something in his sleep and flung one arm out against the wall. The palms of my hands were soaking wet as I picked up the box and board, grinned at Barney, started over to the bookcase to put them away.

On a level with my eyes was a copy of Hemingway's collection of war stories entitled "Men At War," and it was definitely the only *king-sized black book* in sight!

As I leaned over to place the chess set on the bottom shelf, a grating voice from the other side of the room said, "What the devil's goin' on here, Barney?"

It was Vince. I could just see him by looking past the back of Barney's chair. He was sitting on the edge of the bed rubbing his eyes and trying to see past the lighted lamp to make out what the old fellow was up to. Barney was twisted around in his chair looking at Vince. The old one was quickly and quietly folding up the legs of the card table!

It was now or never. I stood up and reached for the book. As I put my left hand on it Vince spotted me, and his voice was a high-pitched scream.

"Barney, you blasted lame-brain, *Look out!*" His right hand darted to his hip.

I yanked the book out and heaved it all in one motion. My right hand dove into the space left by the book and closed over the butt of a small revolver.

The old guy had been waiting for just that. As I twisted around toward Vince I could see, out of the corner of my eye, the card table being swung toward the lamp on the floor. Vince was dodging the book and bringing up his gun when the card table hit the lamp and it went over with a crash.

I hit the floor, gun in hand, just as Vince's two shots stabbed through the inky blackness and zinged over my head, burying themselves in the bookcase. A half-second later there was a terrific clatter in the center of the room and a loud grunt from Barney, followed the sound of a heavy body hitting the floor. Then silence.

Propping myself on my right elbow and keeping my eye on Vince's approximate position, I reached back with my left hand and took two of the paper volumes off the lower shelf. I tossed one of them into what I hoped was a neutral corner of the room. The leaves flapped loudly as the book sailed through the air, and two more shots from Vince cracked out almost before it hit the floor.

But I couldn't locate the gun flashes. Apparently the overstuffed chair was directly between me and Vince, cutting off my view. I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry. I tossed the other book. Nothing happened. He was getting smart and saving his last two shots.

Then I heard the sound of a car approaching hell-bent. It screeched off the highway and skidded to a stop in the extreme rear of the lot. There followed immediately a couple of door slams and the sound of two pairs of feet running across the gravel at top speed toward the house.

Vince was now breathing hard, and I knew why. I edged my way to the right

a bit and glued my eyes to the spot where I figured him to be. Okay, Vince, you brainy little squirt, I thought, what now? It's a nice starry night, Vince. You must be pretty close to that back door. Are you going to let 'em open that door and let in some of that nice, bright starlight? Or are you going to yell at 'em and warn 'em? Either way, Vince, I've got you, brains and all!

JUST as the footfalls reached the door Vince came apart at the seams.

"Stay out!" he screamed. "Duke! Stay out!"

But even as he spoke the door burst open and for an instant the beam of a flashlight fell directly on his blond head. I squeezed off three shots as fast as I could pull the trigger. I knew I'd hit him by the noises he made.

There was the clatter of a chair to my left, followed by the roar of a forty-five. The flashlight near the door dropped to the floor and rolled about a foot.

One pair of footsteps beat a hasty retreat over the gravel. One of the last two arrivals had decided to call it a day.

"Turn up the house lights, son; the show's over."

I could have busted out crying at the sound of the old guy's voice as I fumbled for the light switch. When the overhead lights came on I took my third inventory of the evening.

Vince was dead.

The one by the door, I figured he was Duke, was sitting on the floor with a bulging leather satchel under his left hand.

He was whimpering and staring glassy-eyed at a right hand that looked like something the butcher might feed to a stray dog.

I relieved him of the artillery he had in his pocket. He didn't seem to mind a bit.

Barney was flat on his back and out cold.

There was a livid mark on his right temple, and the card table was resting against his chest, gently rising and falling as he breathed.

The old guy, free of ropes except for his right leg, from which the up-ended chair still dangled, was standing near Barney with the forty-five in his hand. Our eyes met.

"Checkmate," he said.

"You said it."

"That was good shootin', son."

"Thanks. Same to you," I said. "But how did you know you had hit that guy in the hand with only one shot?"

"I didn't work for Colt for twenty years for nothin'," he said, patting the automatically fondly. "Besides, I knew Betsy wouldn't fail me. I've had her to the National Matches at Camp Perry twice, now. Hittin' just a wee bit behind that flashlight was a mortal cinch for her. For a while, though, I didn't think I'd ever get my hands on her!

"After I'd knocked the lamp over and scaled the table at Barney, here, I hit the floor fast, chair and all, same as you did. All the time you were tossing my reading matter around the room I was comin' out of my cocoon. I got all the knots untied but this last one, so I took the chair with me when I went after Betsy on the end table. Cut me loose, huh?"

I went into the kitchen and came back with a knife. As I sawed at the ropes I looked up at him and said, "You know, maybe you can shoot, but as a chess player you're a dud."

HE GRINNED. "Made a lot of bad moves, huh?"

"I'll say."

"Son," he said, "at the time I made those moves, Reuben Fine himself couldn't have found any better ones!"

We put Duke on the day bed and wrapped a tourniquet around his right arm. Then we tied Barney up good and tight. He slept peacefully through it all.

"How about the guy that ran away?" I asked.

"Sheriff'll get him," said the old guy. "He should be droppin' in pretty soon. There's been a robbery, remember?" Then he walked over to a wall mirror to examine his bashed face.

"That must have been pretty tough," I said. "The pistol-whipping, I mean."

"Can't say as I'd care to get one very often, son. But the real tough part came later, after you took the gag off me."

"I don't get it," I said.

"Sittin' there in that darn chair for almost an hour without bein' allowed to say a word was the toughest dog-gone thing I ever expect to have to do the rest of my natural life!"

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

"I'm taking this picture real careful, when the dame lets out a gasp"

The Liquid Bullet

A blond witness remembers a schoolgirl trick!

HELLO—Harry? Yeah, this is Lawson . . . Did the tip pan out? Haven't you got it yet from Headquarters? I'll say it did . . . Okay, okay, give me rewrite . . . Yeah, what do you think I am—a cub? Sure, the pix are on their way in by cab . . . You haven't? Take a look in the dark room. They ought to be developing them now.

"Okay—rewrite? . . . Who's this? . . . Okay, Conant, here it is. I'll deal it off straight and you can put it into Shakespearean prose for all I care. Sure it was John Barnett—you know, the missing assistant D.A. Let me tell it, will you?

"Harry calls me out of a match game at the saloon about an hour ago to tell me some dame has called in on a tip that she's spotted this Barnett. She wants him to send his best man around to meet her at the Criterion. They're folding up a turkey there tonight—some sort of a mystery play called *The Deadly Creep* . . . No, I didn't get there in time to see it. Stop interrupting, will you?

"She's waiting in the stage door alley entrance, just like she told Harry she would be and she's a dish. Blond, blue eyes and stacked. It seems she's Laura Scott, Barnett's secretary, or was until he up and disappeared. She thinks she has him spotted and doesn't dare tell the police.

"It seems her boss was kicking up a mess of trouble at City Hall about Big Artie Schultz. He had the goods on all of Artie's rackets in town and the big fellow was trying to save his skin by making a deal.

"It seems Big Artie owns the Criterion as one of his more legitimate enterprises and her boss stopped in to see him there at his office upstairs before he disappeared . . . That's r i g h t. She

heard him make the date by telephone, but didn't dare tell anyone; that's why you didn't get it.

"She was just about frantic. Then she heard that Big Artie was closing this show, even though it was making fair dough at the box-office. That doesn't make sense to her—she's no dope, Conant. So she goes around to catch it just in case.

"There's a stiff on stage all through the third act. Its face is pretty well hidden but she knows her boss' hairline . . . Yeah, *hairline*. Just because you haven't got one doesn't mean . . . Okay, okay. You've got it. She spots the stiff as her boss, Barnett, and sends an SOS to Harry and he calls on me.

"Well I didn't misspend all those years hanging around stage doors for nothing. I sneak this Scott wench and myself backstage . . . Like fun I'll show you the way. A man's got to have a few secrets . . . It ain't funny, McGee. But anyway, we got back there and sure enough, the stiff is Barnett. There ain't no doubt about its being a real stiff nor about the bullet hole back of the left ear. I snap a half dozen shots and then we hear people coming.

"We climb up the light bridge ladder and make believe we're invisible. And in come Schultz and about a half dozen of his boys rigged out like scene shifters. Four of them get busy with the scenery and begin knocking it down and I'm snapping all I can . . . No, they didn't use the theatre lights or we'd have been gone goslings but they used a big table lamp on what was left of the set.

"Two hoods were left and Big Artie gives them the office to pick up the stiff, and I do mean stiff . . . Yeah, like a board when they lifted his head and feet. I'm taking this one real careful and this gal above me lets out a gasp or something. Guess she couldn't help it.

"WELL, there we are. Big Artie and his boys heard us. They stopped like in a tableau and so did we. We had them cold and they had us a lot colder. Big Artie says to come on down, real gentle like but he wasn't kidding, and we come on down.

"Then the girl does something that looks foolish. She picks up a pistol that's lying on the table by the lamp—part of the show, I guess—and tells the lads to lay off. Not one of them has drawn a gun or even a sap but it doesn't take a custom tailor to figure out they're heeled.

"Big Artie thinks it's funny. He laughs and tells her she should have seen the play because if she had she'd know it was just a water pistol . . . No, it seems one of the characters in this drama uses it to squirt acid. It's that kind of a play but the acid ain't real. I think she's off her rocker until I remember she's seen the show and hasn't been wrong yet, except when she let out that gasp.

"She pulls the trigger like she doesn't believe Big Artie and he laughs harder than ever when she squirts water at him. Then she lets out a yell to me and fires at the lamp and hits it. The lamp busts and we head for my private entrance . . . Yeah, the funny part is Schultz owns the joint but he doesn't know about it. The doorman they had there who died fixed it up so thirsty chorus gals could get soda pop without the stage manager finding it out.

"At any rate, we're outside and manage to find a cop before Big Artie and his boys can get organized. And that's all brother . . . Where's the gal get the idea of squirting out a light with a water pistol? Hold on a moment . . .

"She says she learned it at finishing school—Farmingdale's, wherever that is. Yeah, that's it. Sure I got pics of her. They're in the office by now. What am I doing? I'm playing the match game . . . Yeah, that's what you think but it ain't at the saloon. I'm too busy thanking a certain blonde young lady for saving my life."

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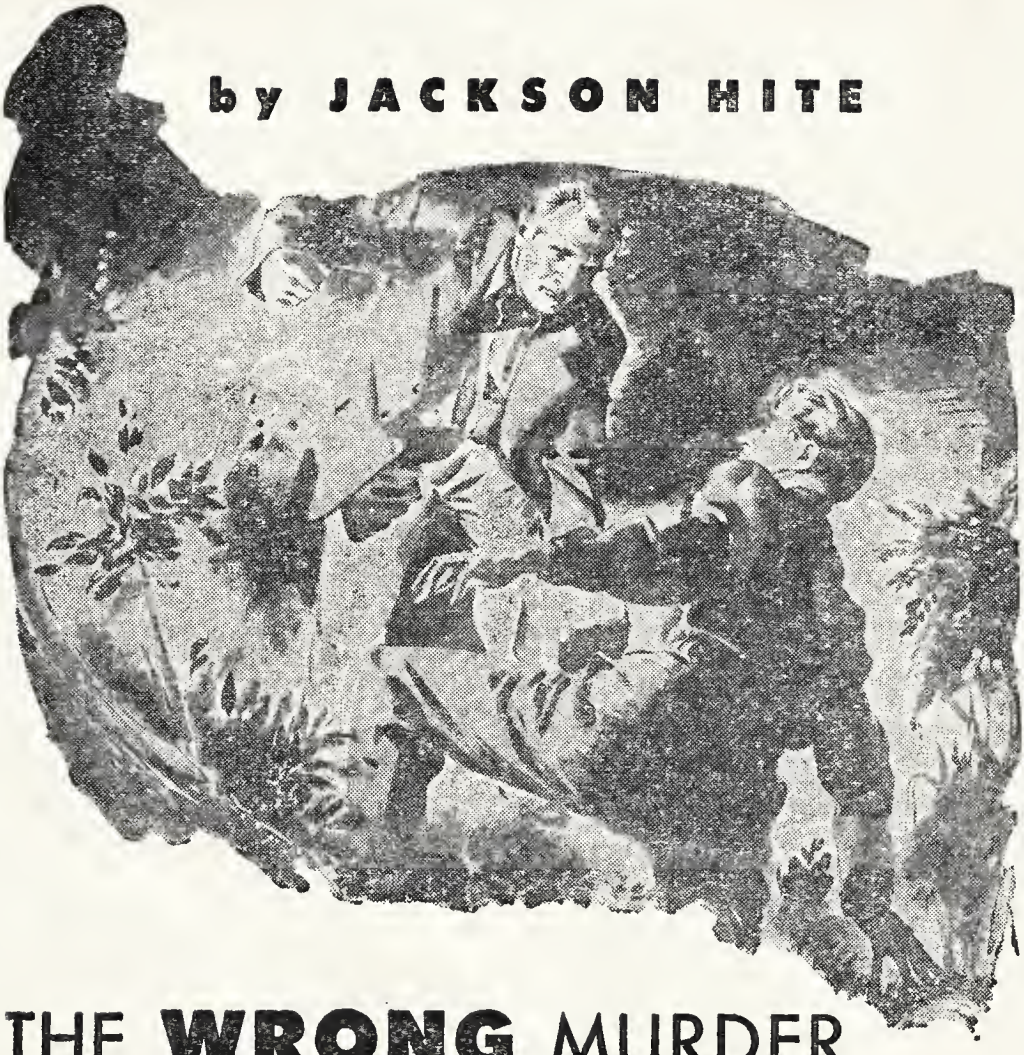
COMING NEXT ISSUE

SWIFT FLOWS THE RIVER

A Thrill-Packed Crime Story

By BRETT HALLIDAY

by JACKSON HITE



THE **WRONG** MURDER

IT WAS common gossip in the Lower Alloway Township section of Salem County that there was bad blood between Sam Hagenberger and Ira Norris. Both were Watkins men, motorized route salesmen for the Watkins Company which sells coffee, spices and other household items direct to consumers all over the nation.

Norris organized a route in the prosperous industrial and farming Alloway region and because he had several small children and needed to augment his income, he took a full time job with the Du Pont Dye Works continuing to operate his route at night and all day on Saturdays. Meanwhile Hagenberger began to run a route on a county-wide basis and friction broke out between the men when Norris accused the other of invading his territory and stealing his customers.

A strange true story of the death of a salesman!

The two route men quarreled publicly several times. One night Norris went to Hagenberger's home in Elmer, a small village about 15 miles from Salem, to talk things over and see if they could come to an agreement.

Two Men in a Brawl

Instead they had a violent quarrel, came to blows, and wound up before Elmer's Justice of Peace Samuel McWilliams where Norris accused Hagenberger of beating him on the head with a mop handle and Hagenberger brought countercharges of disturbing the peace.

The judge disposed of the case by placing both men under a peace bond and warned them against any future disturbances.

Undersheriff William H. Morris, therefore, was not particularly surprised when at about 8 o'clock on Saturday night, September 26, 1942, Ira Norris staggered into the Sheriff's office in Salem's Town Hall building, his shirt bloodstained, and reported that he had been attacked by Hagenberger.

"He tried to kill me," Norris said before he collapsed.

The Undersheriff summoned Constable Fred Edwards and the two officers assisted the injured man directly across the street to the county hospital.

Salem is a prosperous shopping center in the southwest corner of New Jersey and is the county seat. Its streets usually are crowded at that hour on Saturday nights but stores were empty and streets deserted that night because of a cold, slashing rain that had chased away the shoppers. Norris' clothes were rain-soaked and muddy. His shirt was slashed almost to ribbons and his trousers and heavy leather jacket also were cut.

Norris Gets Medical Aid

The officers waited outside the emergency room at the hospital while a young interne went to work on the wounded man. About fifteen minutes later he opened the door.

"He's all right now," the doctor informed the waiting men. "He was stabbed three times, one of them just over the heart. Lucky for him that he was wearing that heavy jacket because the cut didn't go very deep. The other two wounds are on the right arm and thigh and are painful but not bad. He's suffering more from shock than anything else. Better go easy on questioning him."

The officials returned with the injured man to the Sheriff's office. Norris had regained his composure and was able to give a coherent story. He said he had made his rounds as usual that day and was on his way home when two men signaled him as he was driving on Telegraph Road some distance from Cobbs Mill Road. The highway runs through a lonely wooded area at that point. It was getting dark and the clouds that soon would bring rain were massing in the sky.

Norris switched on his lights and recognized one of the men as Hagenberger. The other fellow a husky six-footer, was a stranger to him.

The men said that Hagenberger's car had broken down on a rutted dirt road that led through the woods and asked him if he would help them get their car started. Norris swung his auto onto the country road while the other two stood on each side of the running board. Hagenberger's machine was stuck about 500 feet from the main highway.

Norris opened his car tool chest and took along a hammer with him as he bent over the hood of his competitor's car. While his back was turned the two men leaped on him.

Hagenberger shouted, "Now I've got you where I want you," and started punching.

Norris told the officers he managed to break loose and started to run away through the woods. The tall man caught up with him, hit him a rabbit punch on the back of the neck that sent him reeling to the ground and rifled his pockets, grabbing his wallet and the grocery orders he had taken that day. "I had collected about seventy dollars," he added.

The tall man ran off with his money. While he was getting up, Hagenberger jumped on top of him, kicking and beating him. Norris found his hammer on the ground and lashed back at his attacker with it. The two men struggled in the underbrush for some time and when Norris began to get the upper hand, he said Hagenberger pulled out a knife and slashed at him with the weapon while they still were battling on the ground.

Although only 5 feet 4 inches tall, Norris weighs about 160 pounds and he

succeeded in disarming and subduing his business rival.

"I was so mad at the dirty trick he played on me that I kicked him in the face," he admitted frankly. "I had thought that if I helped him fix his car we might become friends and be able to settle our differences." He said he lost the hammer in the woods during the melee.

Norris took off Hagenberger's belt and tied him up. "He was yelling for his friend to help him when I left," he concluded.

"Won't he be able to work himself loose?" Undersheriff Morris asked.

Makes Murder Charge

"Easily," Norris agreed. All he wanted to do, he explained, was to delay Hagenberger while he made his escape. He was afraid that the second man would return and it would be too bad for him if they both ganged up on him. He felt weak and dizzy from the loss of blood. "I think Hagenberger was trying to kill me," he charged.

A robbery and felonious assault warrant against Hagenberger was sworn by Norris. He described the second man as about 6 feet tall and weighing over 200 pounds. He had been dressed in dark trousers and a lumberjacket. A John Doe warrant was prepared for the second assailant. The complainant volunteered to guide Undersheriff Morris and Constable Edwards to the spot where the attack took place.

"Never mind what the doctor said about my going to bed," he pleaded. "I don't want them to get away with this."

The rain by now was a heavy downpour and the forest road had turned to gluey mud when they arrived. Keeping their car in low gear for better traction, the officers inched along the slippery surface and found Hagenberger's car still parked where Norris had described it. It was a two-door machine that had been converted into a light delivery truck by replacing the back seat with shelves on which the route salesman carried merchandise for immediate delivery. Neatly lettered on the side of the black sedan was,

S. HAGENBERGER, ELMER, N. J.

The dirt road dipped at the spot where the car was stopped and the overhanging shoulders of the road prevented the doors from being opened more than a narrow wedge. The investigators found the key for the ignition in the switch.

Norris stared about him when asked where he had left Hagenberger and then shook his head. "It's hard to tell in the dark where I left him. When both of them charged at me I ran off into the woods somewhere around here."

The officers exchanged glances. Even with the bright lights of their car on and equipped with hand flashlights, they could see only inches in front of them due to the blackness of the night.

"You take one side of the road and I'll take the other," Undersheriff Morris suggested to Constable Edwards. Norris remained in the car because of his condition. For more than two hours the officers sloshed their way through thickets and dense underbrush. They soon were drenched to the skin in the pouring rain.

Finally about midnight they called off the search and took Norris home after which they drove to Elmer where they learned that Hagenberger lived in a rooming house on Broad Street. His landlady said that he had not returned home all day from his route and she was worried since he had never done that before.

When informed of the attack on Norris, she confirmed that the two men had fought over sales territory and added that as far as she knew Norris stayed away from Hagenberger after that.

The officers described the second man who took part in the attack on Norris but the landlady was unable to identify him. She said her roomer was a bachelor and the incomplete description could apply to a number of his friends.

Morris Consults Superior

Morris returned to Salem and spoke to his superior, Sheriff Hubert Layton. The two men are old friends and have worked together on many cases over the years.

Layton ran a hand through his hair as he heard about the assault. "I don't like the idea of Hagenberger having been left tied up in the woods," he remarked. "If he worked himself loose, then his car shouldn't be around. Of course it's possible that he decided to bolt and was afraid he could be traced through his car which would be easy to spot with the name on the side."

The Undersheriff sneezed. "Searching where you can't see won't accomplish much," he pointed out. "It's bad enough in that dense brush on a moonlight night, but it's pretty hopeless now. And Hagenberger could be in Pennsylvania or Delaware by now."

They agreed to meet promptly at 7 o'clock Sunday morning to continue the investigation. Morris was none the worse for his soaking when he met his chief at the appointed hour the next morning. On the chance that Hagenberger might have returned home or sent word to his landlady, the officers drove first to Elmer where they learned that the wanted man still was missing. They next visited Ira Norris and found him in bed, still nervous from his experiences the previous night. He said he planned to stay in bed all day and rest up.

At Layton's request he showed his stab wounds and torn clothes to the sheriff but was unable to furnish any precise directions as to where he had left Hagenberger tied up.

"It was in some bushes, probably a couple of hundred yards off the dirt road," was the best he could offer.

Handicapped by Saturday night's rain which had erased all footprints, Layton and Morris searched the woods off Telegraph Road for more than an hour without finding any trace of where the struggle had taken place. After their clothes had snagged countless times on brambles which also inflicted scratches on their hands and legs, the sheriff called a halt.

"There's too much ground here for just the two of us," he admitted. "I'll try and get some help." He drove to a farmhouse on Cobbs Mill Road where he telephoned Constable Edwards and asked him to enlist the aid of State Troopers and a civilian search party.

While at the house he asked the owner if either of the Watkins men had called there the previous day.

"Sure, both of them," the other replied. "Hagenberger called here first and sold my wife some stuff and then about half an hour later Norris showed up. We thought the other man had taken his place and gave him our order and Norris got all steamed up."

Layton nodded. There was no question that the two men were battling over territory. The sheriff made several other calls along the road.

Mrs. Carrie Johnson reported that Norris had come to her home shortly after noon on Saturday and she showed him a circular left there earlier by Hagenberger. Norris remarked that the other had no right bothering her since she was his customer.

A similar story was told by James Hawkins, Mrs. Johnson's son-in-law. The sheriff learned that the two rival routemen almost met later that day at the junction of Cobbs Mill Road and Friesburg Road. Norris had called at the home of William Jones only ten minutes after Hagenberger left. He asked in which direction Hagenberger went.

"Did he follow him?" asked the Sheriff.

Two Salesmen Part

Jones shook his head. "Norris drove off in the direction of Alloway while Hagenberger went off the opposite way. Later I saw Norris again on the road."

The search for Hagenberger was halted when Norris reported the second attempt to murder him. Constable Edwards was conferring with State Trooper Corporal George Dewinne in Salem about joining the search when the telephone rang. Ira Norris was on the wire.

"They're after me again," he shouted into the receiver. "I had to jump out of the window. The big guy wanted to shoot me. I need protection, I'm afraid they'll kill me."

He was making the call from a neighbor's home to where he had fled for safety. Edwards told him to stay there and a messenger was sent to report the news to Layton and Morris. Corporal Dewinne telephoned the trooper's barracks at near-by Woodstown for additional men and left at once with Edwards. They were met by the Sheriff and Undersheriff.

Norris was at the neighbor's home when the caravan of cars arrived. He was wearing a pair of trousers drawn up over his pajamas and his feet were bare.

"Sheriff, they're out to get me. Can't you stop them?" he pleaded as soon as Layton stepped from his machine.

"We'll take care of you," the Sheriff pledged. "Tell us what happened."

Ira said that after Layton and Morris left him that morning, his wife and

children dressed and drove to church in town. He remained in bed and was alone in the house when he heard a noise suddenly as if somebody was moving about on the first floor. Norris called out asking who was there.

"It was that same fellow who was with Hagenberger last night," he said. "I recognized his voice. He yelled he was going to get me too and then there was a crash of some dishes or glasses breaking and footsteps starting up the stairs."

Afraid of being trapped in his room, Norris didn't waste any time. He leaped out of bed, slipped into a pair of trousers and without waiting to find his slippers or put on additional clothes, he jumped from the second floor window of his bedroom which faces the side of the house.

Norris Runs for Life

"I started running as fast as I could for the cornfields in the back," he said. "The big guy came tearing out of the house after me with a gun in his hand and he fired two shots at me. I kept going until I didn't see him any more and worked my way around to Counsellor's place where I telephoned your office."

The officials accompanied the frightened man to his home. They found a china closet upset in the dining room on the first floor with many of the dishes that had been kept in it broken. Norris used part of it as a desk to hold his papers and these were scattered on the floor with broken crockery. Norris searched through the debris and gathered the papers. All his Watkins records including his list of grocery route customers and his order books had disappeared.

He took the officers upstairs to his room and showed them the window from which he jumped. It was about a twenty-foot jump to the ground. A large bush grew alongside the house.

"Was Hagenberger here too?" Layton asked.

Norris said that he had not seen him and heard only one set of footsteps in the house. He paused and looked at Layton. "Sheriff, what did he mean that he would get me, too?"

"Frankly, I don't like the sound of it," the official admitted.

Corporal Dewinne assigned his men to patrol the highways while other members of the searching party hunted through the surrounding countryside. A description of Hagenberger and the other man was broadcast by State Police to all of its troopers.

"We might as well call the second man, Big Boy, until we get him identified," a trooper suggested.

Sheriff Layton studied the lawn hoping to pick up a distinctive footprint. He examined the bush under Norris' bedroom window and tugged at his lower lip as the men searching the surrounding fields sent back discouraging reports.

Norris did not want to be left alone and the Sheriff accompanied him to his room. As the wounded man began to dress, Layton assembled the clothes he had worn the previous night and explained that he would have to hold on to the garments as evidence until the case was over.

"The shirt is no good to me anymore anyway," Norris remarked.

The sheriff telephoned County Detective Albert Peacock and asked him to take part in the investigation. Peacock was in the rather unusual position at that time of working without anybody to report to. He was assigned to the District Attorney's office but the prosecutor's post was vacant due to inductions in the Army and would not be filled until election time within two months.

When Peacock arrived, Layton and Norris conferred with him and with Trooper Corporal Dewinne. Morris told of Ira's appearance at Town Hall and his investigation that followed. Ira repeated the story of the two attacks on him. The officials examined the slashed garments and the bloodstained shirt as well as the ransacked first floor. Layton summoned Warren Sparks, county identification expert, who took photographs of the house and dusted the china closet for fingerprints.

"I guess it will be safer for you to tag along with us," Layton informed Norris.

Back to the Woods

When it appeared that Norris' attacker had escaped before the police cordon had been thrown around the area, the sheriff suggested that all of them go to the woods off Telegraph Road where the original attack on Nor-

ris took place and resume the search for Hagenberger.

The men spread through the woods working deeper on both sides of the dirt road. During the early afternoon Undersheriff Morris began to work back toward the main highway. He paused about fifty feet from Telegraph Road before a thick clump of laurel and mulberry bushes. Although the bushes did not appear to have been disturbed, the thorough officer plunged into them. His shouts a few moments later brought the others hurrying to the spot.

Hagenberger had been found. The grocery route salesman was dead. He was lying face down on the ground. A leather belt was looped around his neck and tied loosely to a shrub.

Corporal Dewinne knelt and tested the knotted belt. It slipped fairly easily from the bush. Hagenberger's clothes were thoroughly soaked indicating that he had been in the woods during the downpour the previous night. When the officers turned the body over they noticed that his face was covered with black and blue bruises.

"You sure kicked him in the face," one of them remarked to Norris.

Ira's voice shook with emotion as he viewed the body of his business rival. "He was hollering like a stuck pig when I left him," he said. "He should have been able to work himself loose without too much trouble."

The puzzled officials agreed. Coroner Robert C. Cole was notified and he summoned Dr. J. Horace Loscalzo, county physician, and Dr. John S. Dunn of Salem, to perform the autopsy at the county hospital.

Two Hands Killed Him

The physicians reported that Hagenberger had been strangled but not by the belt. They found fingermarks on the throat which indicated that he had been choked to death by manual strangulation. Even though the dead man's face was bruised and his nose broken, they said there were no signs of brain concussion or skull fracture. This ruled out the possibility that Hagenberger had died as a result of the injuries he had received during his fight with Norris. There was no question now that his death was deliberate murder. The doctors estimated that death had occurred some time Saturday evening but could not fix any definite time.

"That big guy came back and killed him after I left," Norris suggested. "That's what he meant when he said he would get me too when he came after me at my house this morning. Maybe he thought it was me tied up in the bushes. It was pretty dark then and maybe he killed the wrong man. I'm sorry it happened to Hagenberger but I'm glad it wasn't me."

Although Hagenberger had been out on his route all day Saturday his pockets were empty.

With the death definitely established as murder, a three-pronged investigation was launched headed by Sheriff Layton, State Trooper Corporal Dewinne and County Detective Peacock. Norris was told there were no men available to guard him at his home and he agreed eagerly to remain at the county jail for protection. The keeper was warned by Layton not to admit anybody at all to his cell block.

The search was pressed for the unidentified suspect who had been dubbed, "Big Boy." Friends of the murdered salesman were questioned without providing any leads. Hagenberger's family lived in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., and the investigation extended to that city.

At the same time the officers were not overlooking the possibility that the assailant could have been somebody out of Norris' past with a grudge against him, and they checked thoroughly into his background as well. They learned that Norris, who was 30 years old, had been born in Lakeland, Florida, and had moved to the vicinity of Salem when he was 16 years old. He had married quite young and was the father of four children. His employment record included posts with a linoleum manufacturing company and a glass making plant.

He had built up his route as grocery salesman while between jobs but decided not to continue it full time in favor of taking a steady position with the dye company, working on his route during his free time. Because Hagenberger had been willing to build up a permanent route on a full-time basis, he had been granted jurisdiction by the grocery concern over the entire county, which included the Alloway township.

On Monday afternoon the officials gathered at headquarters and Norris was brought out from his voluntary stay

in the cell to the room. The officials informed him that they had succeeded in cleaning up the case.

"That's great," Norris exclaimed. "Then you found the big guy."

Corporal Dewinne shook his head. "Not quite," he admitted.

Norris Shows Fear

Norris' face mirrored his disappointment. He pointed out that his life still was in danger as long as the other man was free.

Sheriff Layton stood up and his words jarred the injured man. "It's time we quit fooling, Ira," he said. "You've been lying to us all along and we know it." He revealed that Undersheriff Morris had suspected that something was wrong with the story from the moment he found the car parked at such an inaccessible spot. That is why he had gone to see the sheriff after midnight when he found no trace of Hagenberger. "You didn't want Hagenberger found then and you led Morris and Edwards off on a wild goose chase."

"How was I lying?" Norris asked.

The sheriff picked up the torn garments Norris had worn. "Your clothes told us. There's blood on your outer shirt near your chest wound but none on your undershirt. That could happen only if you put on the blood yourself from the outside. Those three stab wounds of yours don't amount to very much and are nothing more than red herrings. If somebody was slashing at you with a knife they would have cut deeper than that. And you made an even worse mistake. You took off your jacket to cut yourself in the arm but you didn't do a good job of matching it up when you cut the jacket."

He picked up the windbreaker and held it up against the injured man. The slash in the jacket was several inches below and on the side of the actual cut in the arm.

Norris stared at the officials in the room. Their faces were grim as they waited for him to speak. He put his head in his hands. "You're right," he admitted finally, "I faked the attack on myself."

"And you killed Hagenberger," the sheriff persisted.

Norris leaped to his feet. "Oh, no, you can't pin that on me," he protested. "I was sore because Hagenberger and that big fellow jumped on me and so I thought that if I cut myself and accused him of doing it, he wouldn't get away with any peace bond this time."

He said that after the attack he stopped his car on New Bridge Road and inflicted the three minor cuts on himself and threw the knife into Alloway Creek which runs into the Delaware River.

"That big fellow must have done it," he repeated. "Look at the way he came after me Sunday morning."

Window Story Proves False

Detective Peacock spoke up. "Why do you suppose Sheriff Layton had a photograph taken of the place where you claimed you jumped out of the window? Your story about that is as phony as the stabbing. If you had jumped from your window you would have landed in the middle of the bush and wrecked it. The picture shows that bush under your window without any damage. The sheriff wanted a picture made before you realized your mistake and tampered with the bush. You invented that story hoping to prevent us from searching the woods any further."

Dewinne revealed that his men had questioned Norris' neighbors and none of them had heard any shots fired Sunday morning. The officials produced a timetable of the stops made by the competing salesman on Saturday. None of the customers had seen anybody riding with Hagenberger and a number of them had spoken to him while he was seated in his car. The murdered man was still alone when he made his last known call at 3 o'clock.

The timetable of calls prepared by the officers showed that Norris began pursuing Hagenberger about 2 o'clock, asking customers if the other had been there and then speeding away. He only was a minute or so behind his rival about 3 o'clock and finally was seen passing Hagenberger's machine on the road.

"You drove ahead of him and waylaid Hagenberger. That's the way it happened instead of him jumping on you," the officers said. "You tried to kid us into believing that Hagenberger had been murdered by mistake by that mythical stranger you invented. It was murder all right but you made the mistake of trying to fool the wrong people."

They produced a statement from a customer who said that Norris had been angry Saturday because his rival had beat him to that house and he had remarked to the man, "If I see Hagenberger on the road, it won't be so good for him."

The officials also had interviewed Justice of Peace McWilliams who said that after he had placed both men under the peace bond, Norris told him, "Where I come from we fight until one man is down. I'd kill a man who took something away from my wife and children."

When Norris still clung to his story, the officials presented further evidence they had amassed. Justice of Peace Russell W. Boggs and Constable Luke Fithina confronted Norris and told him they saw him on the streets in Salem between 4 and 5 o'clock on Saturday. Norris claimed that he was out on his route at that time.

"It was nice of you to volunteer to stay here in a cell so we could carry on our investigation without you getting wind of it," Layton remarked. He brought in the suspect's wife who admitted that her husband came home about 5 o'clock Saturday and left again after it had started to rain.

Contradictory Statements

In attempting to explain away the conflicting facts in his story, Norris made three different statements each one contradicting something he had said in the other two. Throughout, however, he maintained that Hagenberger had been alive and shouting for his friend to help him when he left the other tied up in the bushes.

Dewinne disagreed with him. "If he were conscious, it would have taken him only a minute to slip the belt off. The reason he didn't was that he was dead and that's why there was no sign of any broken branches in the underbrush. Instead of dragging him into the bushes you laid him in the middle of the thicket in order to hide the body. That was your first thought. Later when you realized that he was bound to be missed and a search made, you invented the story of the attack. We can't find a trace of anybody resembling Big Boy and we can account for every bit of Hagenberger's time until he disappeared right after you caught up with him. Big Boy didn't pop out of the ground. He popped out of your mind. It was a clever story on your part to avoid suspicion, but it wasn't clever enough."

Still protesting that he was innocent and that Hagenberger must have been murdered by his companion, Norris was placed under arrest by Detective Peacock. The Grand Jury was summoned into a special session and returned an indictment, charging first degree murder. Because of the vacancy in the prosecutor's office, the state assigned Assistant State Attorney General John F. Bruther to try the case.

Norris, in one of his statements, admitted that he had taken Hagenberger's money and grocery orders and had buried them in a jar on his property. He led the officers to a spot near the cornfields where they dug up the jar. They also found the papers he had claimed were stolen by the mysterious marauder on Sunday.

The Verdict

The prisoner was placed on trial before Judge S. Rusling Leap on November 17, 1942. The defense offered two theories; one that the mysterious husky stranger had committed the murder mistaking Hagenberger for Norris, and the other, that if Norris was responsible because he had placed the belt around Hagenberger's neck after the fight, then it was justifiable homicide in self defense. This theory ignored the findings of the doctor that Hagenberger had been strangled manually and not by the belt. Norris was unable to explain away the many discrepancies in his different stories.

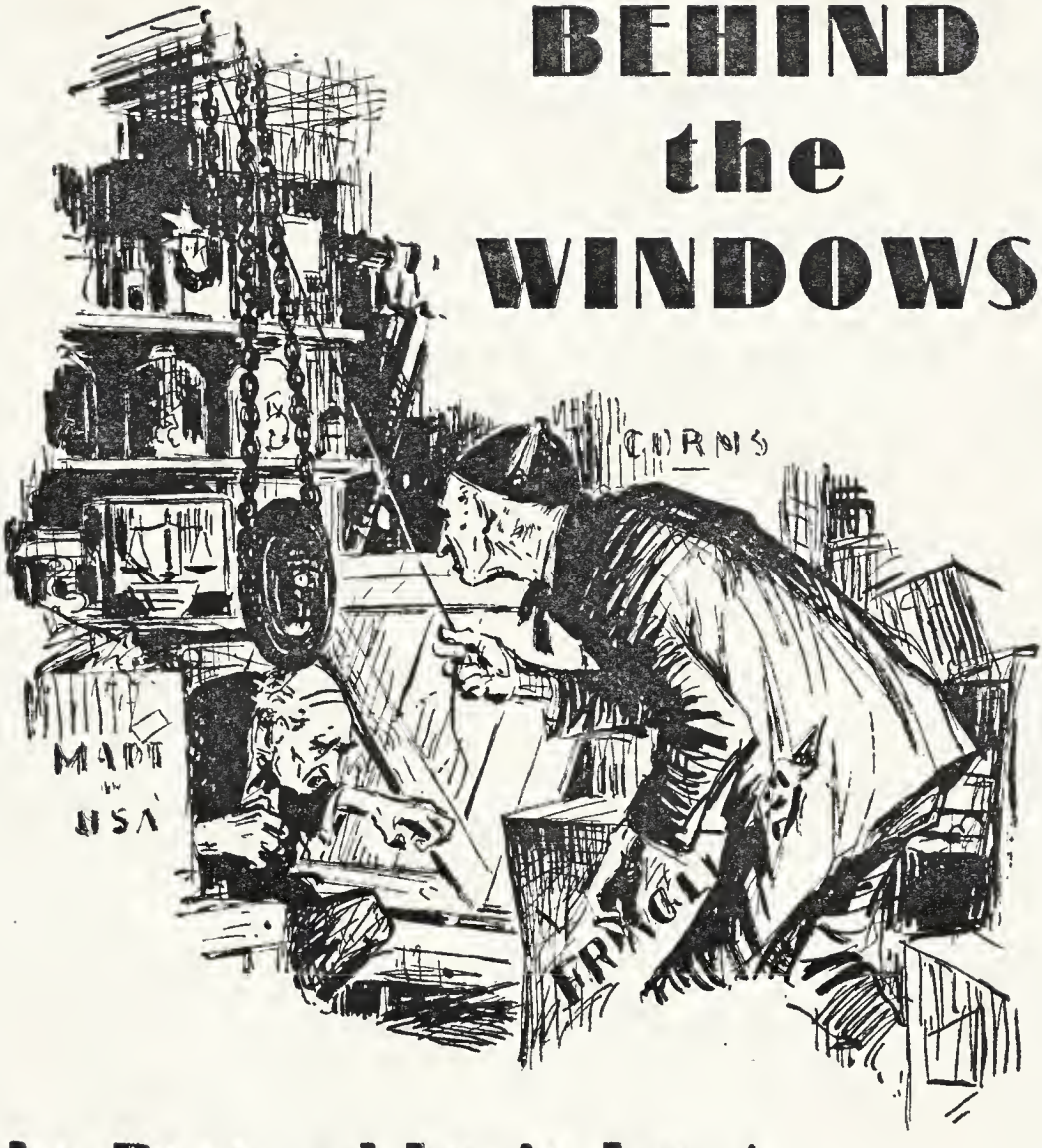
A jury of seven men and five women considered his story of the wrong murder by Big Boy a choice fairy tale and found him guilty of the strange murder plot. They returned with a verdict of first degree murder with a recommendation of mercy which saved the defendant from the electric chair. Judge Leap sentenced Norris to life imprisonment.

Look Forward to —

DR. JEKYLL OR DR. HYDE?

Another Fascinating True Story by **JACKSON HITE**

BEHIND the WINDOWS



by Bernard Louis Jacot

EVERYONE in Appleton knew Raybould's drugstore on Paradise Row. It was a queer sort of place, with two bow windows, up three steps from what was little more than an old courtyard behind the church. There were two other shops in the little square, and a weary tree at the foot of which stood an old-fashioned street lamp. Mr. Raybould himself

When resentment and suspicion stalk the drugstore on Paradise Row, murder is not long in following!

was quite a character. A little old man, always neatly dressed, with a quiet and dignified manner something like that of a well-trained butler, he was much respected in the town. His appearance was rather odd—like that of his shop, for his parchment skin was so wrinkled that he looked like some shriveled monkey, and he had a ferocious set of false teeth.

A pale shadow of himself was his partner (some said assistant), Mr. Bone. The two old men ran the shop, and one or the other of them would emerge from the mysteries of the back part like a deferential automaton as you opened the door.

Each of the bow windows showed three old-fashioned colored flasks, illuminated at night. After dark one side of the little court would be bathed in a soft flood of radiance round about those stone steps with their iron handrails, leaving a misty street-lamp floating over a sea of port wine red, deep green, and Prussian blue.

An old bell on a coil spring jangled over the narrow door as you entered and, from the room at the back, perhaps Mr. Raybould would emerge. He always wore a red plush cap during business hours, and though a little slow in his old age he was always courteous, helpful, and obliging.

Large jars of snakes, frogs, and newts lined the shelves over the counter, and these, in their yellow preservative, had a curiously boiled look. The shop had evidently been furnished in early Victorian days for, though small, there was plenty of gilt lettering upon glass. Under the rows of pickled reptiles was a large panel of mahogany drawers, glass-fronted and inscribed in gold leaf with such fantastic abbreviations as: Ung. Nap., Tinc. Iod., Sul Pisc., and Pot. Per. . . .

Mr. Raybould had inherited the business from the founder, his father, but he was without relations himself and he lodged with an even older lady near the church. His assistant in the shop—Mr. Bone—had been with him thirty-seven years, and in the dark recesses of the establishment these two old men spent the greater part of their waking hours.

MR. BONE, a narrow-chested figure with a receding chin and pale blue eyes, seldom said much, but he copied his chief in dress and mannerisms, and was obsequious and obliging—although, of course, he was not allowed to wear a red plush cap. He went bareheaded to mark his inferior position.

Now, whenever the townspeople thought of the two old men at all, they thought of them as a kindly and courteous pair. But, on this particular evening—the evening Mrs. Martin came into the shop with her child—queer things began to take shape in Paradise Row behind the colored bottles. Something that had been gnawing at Mr. Raybould in secret for years finally brought about a crisis.

On his father's death, thirty-seven years before, Mr. Raybould engaged the services of Mr. Bone, who had answered his advertisement for an assistant. A young man with excellent references, he turned out to be industrious, willing, and respectful. It was only after some years of close cooperation in the little shop that Mr. Raybould began to uncover a curiously mulish streak in his assistant, the outwardly courteous and self-effacing Mr. Bone.

The suspicion came to Mr. Raybould that, under cover of his respectful and deferential ways, this assistant of his was secretly convinced that he knew best. It came up for the first time over a weighing machine which Mr. Bone considered would look well in the shop. Mr. Raybould shook his head. Not in keeping, of course. Three days later the machine was delivered and for some curious reason it had stayed there ever since, paying for itself a score of times over in the years that passed.

That little misunderstanding was only the start. Mr. Bone was never anything but meek and obsequious, yet, if Mr. Raybould stopped to consider, he would find that if he had wanted the shelves in the dispensary painted green he would find Mr. Bone had, in error, painted them chocolate. If he wanted the stock arranged from left to right over the counter, he would find that it ran the other way round, which suited Mr. Bone who was left-handed.

Mr. Bone would occasionally order things on his own responsibility under the impression that his chief's wishes were being served. And over the dressing of the windows there was always conflict, none the less real for being masked under such well-mannered

maneuvers as: "Would you mind, Mr. Bone?" and "Certainly, Mr. Raybould!"

Mr. Bone had modern ideas, and favored advertising matter depicting young ladies with toothy smiles and pictures of fat babies in full color. The babies and the girls kept slipping into the windows.

Now, Mr. Raybould's whole professional outlook was exemplified in his right-hand shop window. That window was very well known. It attracted attention and yet was dignified. It represented a fine, skillful piece of craftsmanship and it had stood the test of time for nearly seventy years.

In that window two stuffed frogs engaged in combat, a duel with real—but toy—swords.

Over long years of underhand antagonism it had soaked into the growing bitterness of Mr. Raybould's mind that Mr. Bone did not care for the duelling frogs.

But now—this particular evening—over the affair of Mrs. Martin's child, a crisis had rushed upon Mr. Raybould and, most curiously, an end had suddenly come to an insufferable tension. It was if a high wind had suddenly dropped, leaving an unbelievable calm. It was as if a weight that had been pressing on him for years had suddenly lifted. For the first time since he had known Mr. Bone, Mr. Raybould felt free and unthwarted.

Mrs. Martin had brought the child, the previous week, for Mr. Raybould to examine, and he had decided that weak Epsom salts and a soothing ointment would clear up the rash. This particular evening the mother had come in to make other purchases, and Mr. Raybould noticed that the rash was painted with iodine. He had only to catch the mulish blue eyes of his assistant to know what lay behind the change of treatment.

FOR the moment the shop swam before Mr. Raybould, and his heart beat fiercely, making the veins in his neck swell and his hands tremble. Then, suddenly, he felt at ease. He became aware that, after all these years, the problem of Mr. Bone had solved itself, and with this new, calm feeling came an odd conviction of inevitability.

From that revealing moment, Mr. Raybould carefully laid his plans. For years this weak-chinned, interfering underling with his scheming had forced his own way upon his employer. And it was not until now that Mr. Raybould realized it! In pin-prick after pin-prick Mr. Raybould had been compelled to yield to the other's will. Now, he had gone too far!

It all seemed very clear and inevitable to Mr. Raybould as he laid his plans. It was as if he had known for years that this was going to happen. There was going to be no false step, no silly mistake. At the back of the shop, behind the glass screen, a trap door was let into the floor. Above the trap was a heavy tackle, used for lowering crates into the cellars beneath. Under the trap was a ladder. The head and shoulders of Mr. Bone emerging out of the floor was a sight long familiar to Mr. Raybould. He was picturing now the sudden fall of the heavy block on that detested head.

Mr. Raybould worked out his plan in detail that night, and he went over it again and again the next day. Mr. Bone, in a red mist of hatred, was much in his thoughts. He thought of Mr. Bone as he had first known him—shy, clumsy, so eager to give satisfaction. Bone was not a qualified chemist and, of course, came the cheaper for that. Mr. Raybould had always resisted his hints at an increased salary as years went by. He had advertised for a youth to help, and as such Mr. Bone had applied for the situation.

"Go, by all means," Mr. Raybould used to say. "I advertised for a youth. I don't require a man."

He knew that Mr. Bone was frightened he would not find another job. As time passed, and Mr. Bone with great tact and delicacy intimated that he might be driven to applying for a situation elsewhere, Mr. Raybould told him:

"If you had been going to leave me, you'd have gone when you were a young man. You're too old now."

As he sat like an old monkey in the dispensary and brooded, Mr. Raybould thought now with a peculiar sense of satisfaction of the little victory he had scored in the early days about the dustbin. In his father's time the dustbin each night had been put out in the alley which ran at the side of the shop. This was the last act of Mr. Raybould's finnicky routine in shutting up shop for

the night, and folks could have set their watches by the trundling of that can into the alley.

Mr. Bone's idea was that the dustbin should be left beside the steps at the shop door, where the collectors could have no excuse to overlook it. And this is where he would place it—unless Mr. Raybould stayed to the very last to watch. For nearly a month the secret tussle had gone on, then Mr. Raybould's will had finally triumphed.

Mr. Bone, last thing, rolled it to its time-honored stand in the alley, without a backward glance. The two men would then bid each other good-night and go their separate ways: Mr. Raybould to his lodgings, and Mr. Bone to his room just across the street.

Over this ashcan, at least, Mr. Bone had been bested.

By that evening Mr. Raybould had everything ready. He had prepared three carefully-tested stumps of candle, measuring off with his old-fashioned watch the time a similar length of candle had taken to burn. The stumps he placed in three boxes which he filled with wood-shavings soaked in oil. While Mr. Bone was away at his lunch, Mr. Raybould had prepared the cellar round some drums of alcohol to receive the boxes, by packing the area with more shavings.

He had then contrived an ingenious line, leading from behind the counter to the heavy block over the trap door. When Mr. Raybould pulled the concealed line it withdrew a bolt from the tackle, allowing it to fall. He tested this several times and it worked well.

When Mr. Bone came back from his lunch a strange look was on Mr. Raybould's face. It was a look of resignation. It was almost a look of pious resignation, for was not Mr. Raybould about to sacrifice his frogs and his shop —everything he held dear—to satisfy this one overriding urge?

AT a few minutes before seven, Mr. Raybould, to exclude late customers, turned the lock in the shop door, as was his custom, and prepared to close up for the day. Without a trace of emotion he sent Mr. Bone below, as usual, and scarcely had he disappeared before Mr. Raybould shuffled round behind the counter. With the cord in his hand he waited, listening to the sounds of the other moving about in the cellar below.

When the head of Mr. Bone appeared above the floor, Mr. Raybould pulled on his cord. The block fell heavily.

Mr. Bone was quite dead when Mr. Raybould turned him over at the bottom of the ladder. His skull was crushed like an eggshell. Methodically, Mr. Raybould gathered his three boxes, and methodically he set them in the piles of of shavings. He soaked the cellar, carefully lit the candles, mounted the ladder, and closed the trap.

He shut up the shop, took a last look at the duelling frogs, rolled the ashcan round into the alley, and set off home. His mind was at rest and he felt almost light-headed with happiness. No longer will that man impose his will on me, he thought, and the thought brought him great content.

Soon after eleven o'clock the shop would be an inferno of flame. The police would send for him, and then he would tell them the story of Mr. Bone working late, alone in the place, perhaps carelessly knocking over a lamp, or something catching fire at the Bunsen burners in the dispensary.

Mr. Raybould's appetite was not affected. He ate his supper and settled comfortably to his pipe and a book, but he had not been reading long before he heard a car draw up outside the house. His landlady showed a police-inspector in, who said:

"Mr. Raybould, I've called about your shop."

Mr. Raybould's face was a mask. A galloping fear began to take hold of him, for he knew that it was too soon for the candles to have set the place on fire. He said,

"What's wrong with it?"

"Have you any information of your assistant's whereabouts?"

Mr. Raybould stared hard at the policeman.

"Mr. Bone I left him working in the dispensary. He had some work to finish."

"When did you leave him?"

"At seven o'clock."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes. Is—is anything wrong"

"I'll have to ask you to come along with me to the station, Mr. Raybould."

At the station they charged him with murder and with attempted arson, and locked him up in a cell for the night.

Mr. Raybould spent some time trying to convince himself that all this could not be true, that it had not really happened. He spent a sleepless night, haunted by his fears, for there was one thing he could not hope to understand. Unless someone had had cause to search the shop, what—for the first time in forty years—had induced anyone to enter the place? What? There was no answer to this.

THERE was no answer until the morning came, and Mr. Raybould had an interview with his lawyer. This legal gentleman looked at Mr. Raybould in a way he didn't like.

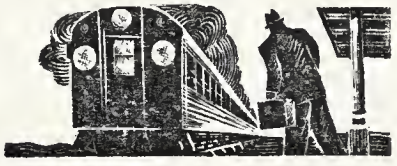
"I am informed," he said, "that the policeman who usually patrols the street noticed last night that your ashcan was not in its usual place in front of the shop and stopped to investigate, and found one door of the shop unfastened and—ah—went in."

Mr. Raybould's throat was dry. He felt as if a steel ring were tightening inexorably upon him.

"But the dustbin is *never* in front of the shop! It's always left in the alley at the side!"

The lawyer shook his head.

"I've been into that. I'm told that it was left in the alley each night, but Mr. Bone made a habit of crossing the road after his supper and moving it to the front door."



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by JOHN W. CLIFFORD

Nicky and a waitress named "Red" went out on the pick-up date— but only one of them came back!

LADY KILLER

NICKY KENTON eased out of the darkness to peer into the lunchwagon. Through a grimy window, bearing the command "EAT," he saw the two inside—a customer and the girl behind the counter. DiAmeco had described her well.

Nicky patted the automatic under his arm and looked down. No bulges. He'd bought the gray gabardine too large and had it taken in only at the hips. That was for looks. But the extra chestroom was turning out handy.

The moment he opened the door, Nicky felt the breath of the place. Hot

air, sodden with the smell of burning grease, enveloped him.

Squatting on a stool he studied the waitress as she leisurely dragged herself over to him—soiled green uniform, straggling hair, sweaty young face. Probing with his eyes, he examined her limp bust, barely discernible beneath the loose-fitting uniform. She stood before him, waiting, her expression inscrutable.

"Hamburger and coffee," he said.

Filling a glass with water, she set it before him. She picked up a ball of meat, dropped it on the griddle and pressed it flat with a metal turner.

When she bent over, Nicky watched the uniform-dress tighten over her figure. It disgusted him that she was so unattractive, but he couldn't keep his eyes off her. Funny how he was about women—more so than most guys even. But the dames went for him quicker than most guys. That's why DiAmeco had picked him to do this killing.

Nicky glanced at the other man, sitting three stools away, an old guy, sipping coffee and reading his newspaper. He looked as if he might sit there for hours. That wouldn't do. Nicky wanted the place to be empty.

She brought him a cup of coffee and a spoon. When the hamburger was ready she set that in front of him too. The grease was soaking through the bun. Deliberately unpacking a big roll of bills, Nicky handed her a twenty to change. Her eyes came alive.

IT WAS funny. This was the girl who had seen DiAmeco slug a man to death. This was the State's only witness against the bookie chief. And the money she eyed so hungrily was DiAmeco's cash payment for her death.

Nicky pocketed the roll, conscious of her at the end of the counter, glancing his way.

As he ate, Nicky watched his reflection in the polished metal over the grill —his wavy black hair, glistening with oil, his full lips, his thick eyebrows neatly razored at the edges. He knew the waitress was seeing more in him than a bankroll. And, deep inside, it excited him.

When he finished eating, the old guy was still sitting there.

"What kind of pie you got?" Nicky called.

"Raisin and coconut cream." She pointed to a shelf, where the remains of two pies sat uncovered. "You probably want coconut cream."

"What makes you think so?"

"You're the kind who falls for that two-inch meringue."

Nicky didn't know whether to give her the smile or not. "Okay. Let's have it."

It worked out fine. She was in an easier mood when she served him the pie. "You get so you can tell what people are going to ask for before they ask for it," she said.

"What am I going to ask for now?"

"More coffee?"

Nicky winked. "You got it." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the old guy getting up to leave. The girl rang up the old man's nickel and came over with Nicky's coffee. She lingered. "You own this place, Red?"

"My hair ain't red." But one hand stole up to it, made the motions of putting waves into place. "No, I just work here. But I'm closing up tonight. Boss's off."

It was really a kick, an obvious dame like this. Show her a bankroll, give her an opening, and she's all ready to be taken. All she wants is that it should look like the guy talked her into it.

She moved over to the coffee urn. "Guess I'll draw one for myself. But I like something in mine." As she brought the bottle from under the counter, she glanced up at Nicky.

"Mine's a little dry, too," he admitted.

She laughed and brought the bottle down, then she went back for her cup. Nicky kept up the patter. It was easy—even under the circumstances, knowing what he was going to do. It was the same line he gave them all.

". . . And I wanted a date first time I saw you. Wanted to walk you home."

"When was that—the first time you saw me?"

"Tonight."

She looked down at the floor, at the scuffed toes of her shoes. "Well, I don't know—" she hedged. And Nicky knew it was settled.

She even closed the place ten minutes early. The victim going out of her way to make it easier for him. The target fitting herself to the muzzle of the gun.

Nicky waited for her outside. The street was deserted and silent as a pris-

on yard after hours. But he had no intention of chancing it here in a business district. He'd get her on a dark side street.

I don't want her there for the trial, DiAmeco had said. *You can handle it, Nicky. She'll go for you, Nicky.*

HIS fingers probed the hard lump of metal under his arm. Funny it felt so exciting this time. Maybe because she really was going for him. She thought it was an ordinary pick-up. And she was willing.

Then the lights went off in the wagon. She locked the door and came over to him.

Walking beside her, Nicky tried to make small talk, but the words wouldn't come now. She brushed against him. He started to take her arm, but didn't. He was excited.

They walked four blocks, into a neighborhood of three-story flats with iron railings and concrete lawns. The buildings were dark and the street lamps cast down isolated circles of light. Except for her heels on the sidewalk, the town was silent.

Then they were walking along a narrow sidewalk, almost shouldered into the street by a tenement building. A street light shadowed their faces as they passed beneath it and melted into the gloom.

Nicky dropped back a half-step. Just enough so he could reach into his coat without her noticing. The gun was warm in his hand as he lifted the weight of it from his chest.

She stopped unexpectedly. "Here we are."

There was a gray slab of doorstep and the dim outline of a weathered door. She turned to him and Nicky saw her eyes glistening, seeking him in the darkness. And he knew what was really bothering him—why he was so excited. She wanted him to come inside. . . .

His stomach was strangely hollow, nervous. His lips felt dry. He moistened them with his tongue. He knew the feeling—the familiar urgent drive. He looked at her, at those eyes gleaming in the shadows.

Why not?

DiAmeco had paid him to do a job. But there was no hurry. He could wait awhile—for a gesture that would thrill the sadistic soul of Nicky Kenton!

He followed her inside. They crept down a hall uglied by two naked yellow lightbulbs. The scarred walls and moldy plaster smell were familiar things to Nicky, he hardly noticed them. His mind was too fascinated by this thing he was doing. It was the ultimate. To have a woman one hour, knowing you would kill her the next.

She unlocked her door and stepped inside. Nicky stood in the doorway, his shadow stretching across the thinly-carpeted room. He watched her move about, waited for a light. None came.

"It's burnt out," she said. "Swipe that one from the hall will you?"

Nicky took out his breast-pocket handkerchief. He reached up carefully to the hot bulb, cautious not to let his gun show. The hall went dim. Just the one tiny light down at the far end. He turned back to the door.

"Here it is."

He could see nothing inside the room now. In the silence he could hear his own breathing, feel his heart beating. Then he heard her footsteps moving cautiously toward him. Nicky stretched out a hand into the blackness—

Coming soundlessly through space, it struck him just above the hair line. His brain split wide open. Lights shimmered into dazzling brilliance all around him, then fell away like fragments of window-glass—and Nicky was falling through the chilly blackness of the unknown. . . .

The police picked her up in Detroit. A tired Lieutenant gave it to reporters. "She hadn't intended to kill the guy—but a flat-iron can be awfully solid. Just a dame taking some poor sucker's bankroll. She wanted the cash to skip town. Seems she was afraid to testify against a hoodlum named DiAmeco."

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NEXT ISSUE

DEVIL'S CHERRY

A Story of Crime and Politics by O. B. MYERS

Too Many Patients DIED

. . . and too many horses lost! The true case of the unlucky physician!

by STACY KENT

YOUNG Dr. William Palmer was always losing patients—and races. This was nothing uncommon in mid-Victorian England. The townsfolk of Rugeley, where he was in practice and had set himself up in style, considered the roly-poly little medico an exemplary character. He neither drank nor swore, and his florid good looks and amiable manner had won the liking of all.

"Poor Willy!" they said, as his horses kept on losing, and his patients kept on dying. "A ruddy shame!"

Had they looked into Willy's past, they would have regarded him in a different light. He was the cruel, nasty type of boy who was always pulling the wings off flies and annoying little girls. He had been discharged from his first apprenticeship, with a wholesale Liver-

pool chemist, for thievery and seduction.

Fired for Theft

While still in his 'teens he had been released from service with a Hayward surgeon, likewise for light-fingeredness and lechery. And at Stafford Infirmary, where his worried mother finally got him placed, they had to forbid him the use of the dispensary when it was found that he was meddling with dangerous drugs.

At Stafford, too, a man had died because of Willy. His name was Abley and he was noted for his consumption of spirits. Willy had bet with a fellow pupil that Abley could down two tumblers of brandy in as many minutes. Flattered, the man had agreed to be the guinea-pig, providing the spirits were supplied free. This detail of the experiment Willy was pleased to arrange. Abley had tossed off Tumbler No. 1, grunted, chased it with Tumbler No. 2. Then he had groaned and expired.

Having lost his first bet of record, and in a sense his first patient, Willy then sought wider fields for his growing interest in medicine. London, as it still is, was *the* place for such activities in those days. Thither he had come, and had been a gay blade According to contemporaries at Bartholomew's, he spent no less than £2000 while a student there, stinted himself in nothing but the payment of his debts.

It was during his London period that William Palmer added horse-racing to maid-chasing. These extra-curricular activities must have kept him fairly busy for he barely passed his final examinations. Then, with that coveted F.R.C.S. tacked onto his name, he had returned to his home town of Rugeley, hung out his shingle.

The Money Marriage

By this time a confirmed track gambler, and with patients piling in on him in no great numbers, Willy was not averse to his mother's suggestion that he marry someone with money. Annie Thornton, lass of his choice, was the illegitimate daughter of a Col. Brooks, who had dallied with his housemaid. When the Colonel committed suicide, Annie had inherited a sizable fortune. So Willy's marriage, though socially unrewarding, was financially advantageous.

The newlyweds settled in a comfortable house opposite the Talbot Arms, an inn which the horsy little doctor was destined to make notorious. He "kept his carriage," as they said, and for a time seems to have put his unsavory past well behind him. Annie was his "sweet little form" and he was her "own dear Willy." Practice began to develop and the future looked bright.

Annie was a good wife and babies started coming at the usual intervals. But for some reason, maybe because Willy hadn't studied hard enough in London and didn't quite know how to minister to their little pains, only one survived infancy. That was the first-born, Willy, Jr. The other four all died in convulsions within a fortnight of their births.

Another Mysterious Tragedy

If poor Annie felt that her bad inheritance had anything to do with these little tragedies, or that God was punishing her for her mother's sins, the thought was banished from her tormented mind when a Rugeley maid bore Willy a baby girl who died in these same mysterious convulsions.

Mrs. Palmer censured her husband neither for his moral conduct nor his medical incompetence. Such was the England of those days, Queen Victoria notwithstanding. But there must have been more than a dull ache in her heart, as she clutched Willy, Jr. hungrily to her breast, scarcely letting the little tot out of her sight.

Regularly they went to church on Sundays and the seemingly devout little medico could often be seen making notes on the margin of his Bible.

"Faith has a heavenly influence," was one of those notes. Whether this was all a part of a deep-laid plan, based on a calculation that this book might one day serve him in court, or whether Willy was really religious—that is a question many people were to ask and one that was never to be answered.

Lady Luck Lets Willy Down

Certainly he had an almost boundless faith in horse-flesh. With the aid of his

wife's money, and some of his mother's, he had built up a moderate stable and was breeding racers. But though his mounts were fairly good, it seemed that they just couldn't win often enough to pay their feed, or Willy's. Adept as he was with most lasses, the young Lothario couldn't get anywhere with Lady Luck. She shied off the Palmer colors as if they cloaked a spectre.

The most ruinous example of this was the time Willy ran Nettle for the Oaks. He was up to his ears in debt but would be sitting pretty if Nettle won, for the stake was 10,000 pounds. And Nettle was the favorite. But she bolted and threw her jockey!

What Willy's thoughts must have been, as he saw his mare come tearing riderless off the course, are unrecorded! A moment before, all set to recoup his every loss. And now, sunk fathoms deep in debt.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men," as Shakespeare has so aptly said, "which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries." Such a tide William Palmer had missed that day at the Oaks. Nettle—or Luck, or Fate, whatever it be called—had let him down. And down went Willy, from that day onward, in a dizzying whirl of murder and despair.

The Wary Mother-In-Law

Needing thousands of pounds, quickly, he approached his mother-in-law. But Mrs. Thornton hadn't been "the Colonel's Lady" without acquiring some sense. She saw no reason why she should fling good money after bad. So she sent Willy 20 pounds cash and a thousand times that in good advice, which could be summed up by four modern words: "Lay off the horses!"

But Willy couldn't, or wouldn't. So if his fusty old mother-in-law wouldn't come across willingly, he'd have to find another way. With rare persuasive power, he got her to visit them at Rugeley. Why she agreed to go, no one will ever understand.

"I know I shall not live a fortnight, once I set my foot in that house," the old lady said. And how right she was! Within a fortnight, almost to the day, Mrs. Thornton expired — and William Palmer got possession of nine houses and a neat sum of money.

Horses Keep Losing

But the doctor's horses kept on losing and presently he was again in difficulties. This time a racing friend named Bladon was dragged to the rescue. Suffering from a mild stomach disorder, and not knowing how unlucky the little medico was with his patients, he agreed to make a visit and undergo some treatments. With him, at Willy's suggestion, he brought his betting-book and 1000 pounds in banknotes, but was to have little use for either.

Soon Bladon became so ill that Willy called in doddering Dr. Bamford for a consultation, explaining that he felt too unlucky to risk losing any more patients. This halt, deaf, blind and half feeble-minded old medico took his young colleague's word for the malady, acute colic, and prescribed. It is not known what, or what Willy gave, but presently Bladon died—and Bamford obligingly signed the death certificate.

By this time some of the townsfolk were beginning to say that William Palmer was a bit more than unlucky. But Bladon's widow would hear none of such talk, even though his betting-book and his 1000 pounds were not found in his clothes. To the most outspoken of the whisperers, a Mr. Bostock, she wrote:

> I felt and still feel extremely obliged to Mrs. Palmer for her kindness to me, which could not have been greater if I had been a relative of her own. Consider how shocking it would appear, without some more proof than mere surmises, to accuse anyone of a foul crime which your letter more than hints at. If your mind is not easy, go over yourself and make inquiries, but pause ere you do anything to render Mrs. Palmer so uneasy as so dreadful a suspicion must make her.

If Mr. Bostock went, he must have found Annie in a bleak frame of mind. It was most fearful, the way Willy kept losing his patients. Among them had been four of his own legitimate children, plus at least one born out of wedlock. Then his mother-in-law, her own mother, had succumbed. And now it was this old friend, Mr. Bladon.

Palmer Insures His Wife

Holding Willy, Jr. close, Annie was heard to exclaim one day, "All my babies

but you died here! Then poor Mama! And now, poor Mr. Bladon! Will my turn be next, I wonder?"

It was not, though she had been foolish enough to let Willy insure her life for 13,000 pounds, on which the annual premium exceeded her income. The unlucky doctor's next victim was an uncle, his mother's brother. Then came an aunt, or nearly. But this fortunate old lady disliked pills and threw them out the window. They landed in her chicken-run. It was too bad for the hens. Next morning several were dead.

Had a young man named Bly learned of this, and profited by its implications, he would have lived longer. Owed 800 pounds by Willy, and feeling somewhat indisposed, Bly made the mistake of letting the hard-pushed little medico look him over.

"You are in a bad way, my friend," Willy told him—and so he was. He expired within the week. To his dumbfounded widow, the doctor explained that the 800 pounds had been owed not *to* but *by* Bly. In any event, it was by-by. Bly. So what was the use of arguing? There is no evidence that Mrs. Bly paid.

What Willy needed was cash—more and more of it, as his horses continued to lose. And he knew where it was, 13,000 pounds of it, if he could just be unlucky enough. . . .

A Slight Chill

Annie Palmer went to a concert in Liverpool on Monday, September 18, 1854. It was a raw night and she took a slight chill. On returning home next day, after stopping over with some friends, she felt a bit feverish. So she took to her bed and—who knows with what apprehension? — summoned her husband. Very solicitously he attended her. Soon she was much worse.

By Wednesday Annie was vomiting the oat gruel and arrowroot tea prepared by the servant girl, Eliza Tharm, but fed to her by Willy himself. And by Sunday the anxious spouse called in old Dr. Bamford for one of those ominous consultations, persuaded him to agree on English cholera as a diagnosis. Calomel pills were prescribed and Willy administered them.

Did Annie believe they contained calomel? As she lay tossing in pain, her horsy-smelling and nervous husband hovering around solicitously, what dark thoughts ran through her dulling mind? Could it be possible she didn't suspect he was going to be unlucky again? Or was she just too tired and ill to care?

Ailing Annie Succumbs

At any rate, poor Annie died the following Friday—and again Dr. Bamford obliged by signing the death certificate. Her plump widower seemed overcome with grief. Taking Willy, Jr., in his arms, he wept bitterly. And that night he wrote in his dairy:

Sept. 29th, Friday—My poor dear Annie expired at ten past one.

Nine days later he wrote: Oct. 8th, Sunday—At church, Sacrament. And nine months later the servant girl, Eliza Tharm, bore him a child—a child that must have been conceived almost at the very time "poor dear Annie" died.

Perhaps William Palmer had actually been fond of his wife, as some folks maintained to the end. Certainly he gave every evidence of it, both before and after her death. But the plain fact of the matter is that, fond of her or not, she had become a luxury he could no longer afford.

With the 13,000 pounds the insurance offices reluctantly paid him, Willy settled his debts, flung himself with new vigor into his racing, determined that this time he would recoup everything, build a substantial fortune. But it was not to be. Soon he was worse in debt than ever.

The Next Victim

Casting about desperately for some new source of income, William Palmer turned to his brother, Walter, a good-natured, rather doltish chap, also much given to gambling and a heavy drinker to boot. Separated from his wife and not too healthy, he seemed to possess the makings of an ideal patient. If Willy could just insure his life for enough money, then be unlucky enough trying to cure him of the drink habit. . . .

Willy succeeded in obtaining a 13,000-pound policy on Walter as security against a small loan. He evidently considered 13 a lucky number, after the way it had worked with Annie, though actually he had tried to obtain an 82,000-pound policy on Walter. But the insurance offices were becoming a bit leery

of this unlucky doctor. In fact, even the company that issued the 13,000-pound policy did so after the medical referee had reported as follows:

Most confidential. His life has been rejected in two offices. I am told that he drinks. His brother insured his late wife's life for many thousands, and after the first payment she died.

As was to be expected, Walter's health deteriorated rapidly, under the ministrations of Willy. To better care for this ailing brother, Willy had taken him into his home. There he proceeded to give him a most unorthodox treatment for drink addiction—a quart of gin a day, plus several large white pills. The pills seemed to have a soothing effect on nerves the former shattered. They had such a soothing effect, in fact, that presently Walter died.

Again doddering Dr. Bamford was called in.

"Apoplexy," Willy said, bemoaning his ill luck. "I should appreciate it, under the circumstances, if you would sign the death certificate."

In the Same Grave

Bamford, happy to oblige his unlucky young colleague once more, did so. Thereafter grieving Willy wasted no time. He had poor Walter measured for a casket almost before the body was cold. Then, not even waiting for arrival of the widow from London, he had him buried—in the same grave with his four babies, his mother-in-law and his wife.

But this time the insurance people were outright suspicious. They hedged, postponed payment. Fearful of an inquiry, Willy didn't press them. But he had to get money somewhere, right away. So he got into touch with a London money-lender named Pratt, began borrowing large sums at 60 per cent interest. And his horses kept on losing.

Frantic, Willy cast about for a method of repaying Pratt, since at that usurious interest rate the debt would more than double in a year. If only he could collect that 13,000 pounds the insurance people were holding back on Walter! But they were beginning to act so alarmingly that he didn't dare open his mouth. And if they wouldn't pay on Walter, what use trying to insure any of his other patients? Yet from some source, and soon, he must have thousands of pounds, or be utterly ruined.

Such thoughts are not conducive to good health and the sporting medico, though only 30 years of age, began to present the appearance of a man much older. His eyes grew puffy from lack of sleep and the flesh on his fat face fell in loose pouches. He developed an asthmatic wheeze. Truly in worse shape than most of his patients, he needed a long rest—and was soon to get one. Meanwhile he continued to haunt the racetracks, flung Pratt's money despairingly after his own.

One day, for a moment, the tide seemed to turn. It was November 13, 1855. Lucky 13 again! Johnny Cook, one of his cronies, had hit the jack-pot in the Shrewsbury Handicap. Pockets bursting with banknotes, and hundreds more to be paid off in London, Johnny was the toast of the town.

A Champagne Dinner

Behold them in Shrewsbury that night. Willy has clung to Johnny as a maiden to her rosary. They have a champagne dinner at the Raven Inn, with friends of both sexes for company, and for once Willy drinks a bit. Later they take adjoining rooms upstairs, so that Willy can be close to Johnny, should his excesses bring on a stroke of apoplexy.

Willy prepares a night-cap before they retire. "Something special!" he says, offering it in the presence of a Mr. Fisher and a lass of the village. Johnny takes the tumbler, says "Down the hatch!" or whatever it was in those days. Then he says *"O-ow! That burned my throat."*

"Nonsense!" says Palmer, noting there is a sip left in the glass. "I'll finish it." And he does, adds, "See there's nothing wrong with this drink."

But he makes a wry face. And as for Johnny, he upchucks his.

But the odd part is that, though Johnny told Fisher he believed Willy had tried to poison him, nevertheless he agreed next morning to go on to Rugeley with the persuasive little doctor—much as Annie's mother had done. Willy got him a room at the Talbot Arms, across the street from the Palmer house. "Where I can look after you," he said.

That was Thursday, November 15. And so well did Willy look after Johnny that by Monday, November 19, Johnny

was well enough to send Willy down to London to collect the balance of his accounts on the Shrewsbury Handicap, some 450 pounds. Not much, but it would satisfy Pratt for a while. So Willy made the collection, turned it over to the money-lender as interest on his huge loans.

Arriving back at Rugeley early the following evening, Willy hastened to the Talbot Arms. Johnny wanted his money but Willy gave him some pills instead, saying they would settle their accounts in the morning. But Johnny settled his that night, with his maker. And, as usual, old Dr. Bamford signed the death certificate—"Apoplexy" again.

There were some folks who didn't think it was apoplexy, among them Mr. Stephens, Johnny's step-father. He demanded an autopsy, and it was held, but no poison was found. So they buried Johnny Cook. And, for a while, William Palmer breathed easily again.

The Inquest

But at the inquest, held over the exhumed remains on December 14, Coroner Ward ruled, on competent medical testimony, that death had resulted from "tetanic contractions of the respiratory muscles, such as caused by strychnine." And he produced a chemist's assistant, Charles Robert, who stated that Willy had bought strychnine from him shortly before Johnny's death. Whereupon a verdict of *Wilful Murder* was returned.

Dr. Palmer then went to jail and Coroner Ward went to digging. He exhumed the bodies of Annie and Walter. Annie's was found to contain antimony but no poison was found in Walter's. The supposition was, however, that death had resulted from some such evaporative drug as prussic acid. So the Coroner's jury returned two more verdicts of Wilful Murder.

It was now, as the modern saying goes, about all over but the shouting for little William Palmer. His trial opened at the Central Criminal Court in London, May 14, 1856. Witnesses for the prosecution were numerous and their testimony damning. But the most damaging witness of all was Willy's past. The boy who had pulled the wings off flies and annoyed little girls, who had thieved and lechered and gambled his youth away, didn't look deserving of much sympathy to those twelve stern Englishmen who heard the sordid tale, and the chronology of horrors that followed.

The defense did their best but they really had no case. Willy's Bible was produced, with its sanctimonious marginal notes, but served only to stiffen the jurymen. The plaintiff's one strong point—that no strychnine or other poison was found in either Walter Palmer or Johnny Cook—was blasted by a note in Willy's own handwriting, on the margin of a book on Toxicology found in his library:

> Strychnine kills by causing tetanic fixing of the respiratory muscles.

Coroner Ward smiled grimly—and the jury stepped out, at 2:18 p.m. It was May 25, 1856. At 3:35 p.m. they returned and the prisoner was put back in the dock. "Gentlemen of the jury," asked the Clerk of Arraigns, "are you all unanimous in your verdict?"

"We are," said the Foreman.

"How say you, gentlemen?" inquired the Clerk. "Do you find the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty."

"Then, Prisoner, you stand convicted of murder. What have you to say why the court should not give you judgment to die according to law?"

Willy's last horse had lost.

"I have nothing to say," he said.

The Death Penalty

So the Lord Chief Justice assumed the Black Cap and pronounced sentence—and now it was truly all over but the shouting for little William Palmer.

But there was plenty of that.

"Poisoner!" the mob shouted as he stood there on the scaffold outside Stafford Gaol. *"Poisoner!"*

But Willy said nothing. Then they sprang the trap—and after that he couldn't say anything if he'd wanted to, unless perhaps to Annie or his babies, or his brother, or his mother-in-law, or Mr. Bladon, or Mr. Bly, or any of the other fifteen innocent people this unlucky little gambler sent to their deaths.

Thus died William Palmer, F.R.C.S., at the age of 31. Despite his cruel and lustful nature, he might have made quite a success as a physician, had more of his horses won.

Murder *and* Matilda

"How long would you say he's been dead, Andy?" Matilda asked

by

FREDRIC BROWN

THE TELEPHONE in my office rang and Matilda Jones said, "There's the telephone, Andy."

I said, "I'm not deaf, Matilda," and I finished lighting my pipe before I answered it.

"That you, Sheriff?" the telephone wanted to know, and I admitted it was. It said, "This is Hank Wheeler."

I said, "How are you, Hank?" and he said, "Fine." Then he said, "Just wanted to report something, Sheriff. Might not mean anything, and then again it

Maybe woman's place is in the home, and again maybe it isn't — when she's a deputy sheriff!

just might. Y'know I leave milk at Olin Pearce's house every morning Well, he ain't been taking it in."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, this morning there were still two bottles there—yesterday's and the day before yesterday's—getting sour."

"That's probably the way he likes it," I said. "But thanks for calling. I'll find out. Olin isn't out of town, or anything that I know of."

Hank said, "Nope, he ain't out of town. You wouldn't catch Olin slipping up on something that costs him fifteen cents a day. He'd have left me a note."

"You tried knocking on the door?" I asked.

"Sure, yesterday morning and this morning. No answer."

"Okay, Hank. Thanks a lot." I hung up. I told Matilda, because she was looking at me questioningly.

Matilda Jones, I'd better tell you, is my new deputy sheriff. She used to be a clerk in the records bureau, but when there was a deputy job open a month before, she'd applied for it. The county board had had a brainstorm and given it to her. I'd squawked plenty, but it hadn't got me anywhere.

I stood up and said, "Well, I guess I'd better go around to Olin's and see what's what. Maybe he's sick or something."

Matilda said, "He's got a phone—why don't you try that first?"

"Guess I might as well," I admitted. I tried, but there wasn't any answer. I let the phone ring a long time.

"Maybe he's been murdered," Matilda said. Her eyes were shining with excitement. "Let *me* go, Andy."

I said, "Matilda, you've been reading too many detective stories. There hasn't been a murder in Coreyville for sixteen years. Olin Pearce might be dead—I'm not saying he isn't—because he's got a weak heart and he's so poison mean that someday he'll—"

"How about what the Lang kids saw?"

I said, "The Lang kids? Oh gosh, Matilda, you aren't going to try to tie that in with whatever's wrong with Olin Pearce, are you? Billie and Bessie Lang are a couple of young rapscallions! Just because they say they saw somebody carrying something that could have been a body—"

"They didn't say it could have been, Andy. They said it *was!*"

I felt myself getting a little hot under the collar. I said, "Listen to reason, Matilda. It was night, and they were looking out of their window and saw this something in the lane, and the lane's a hundred yards from their house and at that distance they couldn't tell a body from a sack of seed wheat."

Matilda frowned at me. "Andy, that path comes out of the woods. Why would anybody be carrying a sack of seed wheat out of the woods around midnight?"

"For better reason than they'd be carrying a body. Anyway, I didn't say it *was* seed wheat, Matilda. I don't think they saw anything at all. Or maybe they saw a cow or something in the lane and in the dark it looked like one man carrying another."

"It was bright moonlight."

I sighed; you just can't argue with Matilda. I said, "What's more likely, is that they were dreaming."

"Both of them, the same dream?"

"One of them. And the other's lying to back the first one up. Or maybe both of them are lying. Matilda, I've been sheriff a long time. I'd go crazy if I made an investigation every time a kid had a bad dream."

"Just the same," Matilda said, "I'll bet that it was a murder or something, Andy."

"If it was murder," I pointed out, "it wouldn't have been Olin Pearce. Nobody'd kill him and carry him home afterward, would they? And if the Lang kids' story is true, somebody was carrying somebody *out* of the woods, and that'd be toward Olin's place."

"Just the same—" Matilda said. "Oh, let *me* go out to Olin's, Andy. Please!"

"Oh, all right, if you want to," I said. "If you got to have a murder, go find one."

"I'll try to," Matilda said, and she left.

I GRINNED to myself and turned back to the paper work on my desk. Most likely, I thought, Matilda'd find a note Olin had left to have his milk stopped for a while that Hank hadn't found. But Matilda'd find it; I had to admit Matilda was good at finding things.

Of course, it might be worse than that. Olin really might have had a stroke and died. But Matilda wasn't

afraid of corpses; her dad had been the undertaker before he died, and Matilda had been brought up on corpses, you might say.

Yes, if Olin was dead, she could handle things. And if he was sick instead of dead, she could handle things better than I could.

In fact— But I didn't go on with that thought, because I hated to admit, even to myself in private, that Matilda could handle a lot of things just as well as I could, and some things better. Including, of all things, shooting. She belonged to the Rifle Club, and she'd won a sharpshooter's award with a pistol.

But just the same I hadn't wanted her for a deputy and I'd told Harry Wilks, who is chairman of the county board, so in no uncertain terms. Harry'd just laughed at me. He'd said:

"Trouble is, Andy, you're afraid of her. And maybe you got cause. I think she is maybe a little soft on you and that's why she tried for the job. But you could do worse. You're forty, Andy, and she's thirty-three and she's a fine-looking woman. You could do worse than get caught, but you don't have to if you don't want to."

"Don't worry," I'd told him. "I'm a confirmed bachelor, Harry. What worries me is those detective stories she always reads."

He said, "Get her reading love stories," and snickered, and I saw I wasn't getting anywhere arguing and let it go at that.

But I had to admit, now, that once in a while I got to wondering, when Matilda was around, whether being a bachelor was such a good idea or not. Still—

The phone rang and I answered it. It was Matilda's voice and she sounded excited.

"Olin Pearce is dead!" she said. "I had to break in."

"All right, Matilda," I said. "You can break out again, and I'll send Doc Breneman around. Probably his heart."

"It was his heart, all right," Matilda said. "There's a knife stuck in it!"

"Huh?" I said. "Say that over—slow."

She did, and it sounded the same. I said, "I'll be over." I got Doc Breneman, the medical examiner, on the phone and told him, and then I went over to Olin's.

Matilda let me in and her eyes looked like headlights.

"Murder, Andy!" She said it reverently.

"Bunk!" I told her. "Olin's killed himself, that's all. Down at the bank, they were telling me about the bad investments Olin made last year. He's flat broke and couldn't take it." I looked around. "Where is he?"

"On the floor in the kitchen."

I went into the kitchen and there was Olin Pearce sprawled out on the floor, face up. And there was a knife sticking up out of his chest, or rather the handle of one. The blade was all the way in.

I bent down to look close, and I grunted, because it was a knife with a polished black handle that ought to show fingerprints beautifuly. I got my nose down to within inches of it and put my flashlight on it, and there weren't any fingerprints at all.

I didn't like it. I recognized that knife; it was Olin's, one he kept on his desk and used as a paper knife. So that part was all right. But Olin wasn't wearing gloves and there wasn't any handkerchief around he could have held the knife with to kill himself and not leave fingerprints.

Besides, I remembered how long the blade was and it was pushed in pretty far, and that made it look less like suicide, too. When a man kills himself with a knife, he usually loses interest and quits pushing when the point reaches his heart.

I said, "No bleeding at all, either."

"Would that mean anything, Andy?" Matilda asked.

"Not necessarily," I said. "Not when the knife's left in the hole that way. It isn't like a bullet, leaving a hole behind it. I mean, a knife leaves a hole, all right, but it plugs it up, too, if it's pushed in straight."

"How long would you say he's been dead, Andy?"

I said, "Three days—seeing that with today that's how long he didn't take in his milk—looks logical enough. Doc Breneman will— Say, that sounds like his car now."

IT WAS Doc's car, and Doc took a look and a sniff and agreed that three days were likely enough. He asked, "Shall I take him down to the funeral parlor now, or do you want photographs

or anything?"

"I guess not," I said. "The only camera I got is a— No, I don't think I need photographs. I'll mark a chalk outline and then you can take him along. I'll go get his brother to identify him officially and then—well, I guess I might as well arrest him."

"You mean Joe Pearce? You think *he* did it, Andy?"

"Who else?" I asked. "Nobody in town liked Olin, and nobody but his brother had any reason to kill him. Joe's as poor as a church mouse, living like a hermit out in that shack in the woods, and he can sure use the money he'll get, if any."

Doc Breneman scratched his head. He asked, "Why the 'if any,' Andy. Olin never spent any money; he must have some."

"He lost plenty in some bad investments. He's just about broke, but Joe Pearce wouldn't know that. Fact is, Doc, Olin owes the bank some money. Maybe his personal property and his house will cover it, but I doubt if there's enough left over for a funeral."

I went ahead and marked the chalk line—not for any good reason that I could think of, except that it was just something you did when you moved a body—and then I sent Matilda back to the office and left Doc to take the body down to the funeral parlor, which is next door to the courthouse and which we use for a morgue when we need one, which isn't often.

Then I drove my car out to the edge of the woods, by the house the Lang kids live in, and walked back the path that led to Joe Pearce's place.

They were a funny pair of brothers, I thought to myself, as I walked back there. Olin living in a nice house in town and doing all right by himself financially—for a while, anyway, before he made those bad investments and then threw good money after bad trying to recoup—and Joe, his brother, going screwy in the opposite direction, as it were, and simple-lifing it in a shack in the woods.

I'd never cared particularly for either of them, but Joe, screwball or not, was the better of the two. Olin had got himself rated as the meanest man in town, and I guess he'd earned the title.

The shack was about a mile back from the edge of the woods, and I walked it slowly, trying to think out how I could handle things best.

Joe Pearce was chopping some wood when I came up. He said, "Hello, Sheriff," and I said, "Hi, Joe. 'Fraid I got some bad news for you. Something happened to your brother."

"Olin? You mean he's dead?"

I nodded. "Guess you'll have to come in and identify him. Nearest relative."

I figured I'd rather get him in that way than arrest him.

I watched him closely, but he seemed to be acting normal. No special signs of grief, but then there wouldn't be any unless he was acting. The Pearce boys had been friendly enough to one another, but not what you'd call close.

Joe put down the ax and rubbed his hand gently across the stubble on his face. I often wondered how he always managed to have a three to five-days' growth of beard on his face. He must have shaved once a week at least, but I never caught him just after.

He hitched up his overalls, shoved his disreputable remnant of a hat back farther on his head, and said, "Okay, then, let's go."

On the way back, he asked me, "Was it his heart, Sheriff?"

"In a way," I said.

And it occurred to me that I could angle for something that would be helpful later. I said, "Joe, I guess you'll have to be appointed executor. How well was Olin fixed? What do you figure he was worth?"

"Well, Sheriff, I don't guess he was worth much. Oughtn't to say it about my own brother, but he never did anything but grub over money. And what did it get him?"

"That's what I was asking," I said. "How much do you think he had?"

"Not any, last he told me. He was busted flat. Way he told me, he owed more than he could raise or borrow. Can't you get a lawyer to wind up the estate, Sheriff? There won't be anything in it for me anyway, I figure."

"Um," I said, because I couldn't think of anything to say. The whole thing had looked easy, up to now.

But then we were coming out of the woods and I looked up and saw the Lang house and the window of the attic bedroom where Billie and Bessie Lang slept, and I remembered what they'd said about seeing somebody carrying a body

out of the woods and toward Olin's house, three days ago.

WE GOT to the courthouse where my office is and I took Joe up to my office first. Matilda was there, and Doc Breneman.

I said, "Doc, will you take Joe next door and get him to sign a statement of identification of the body?"

They left, and I looked at Matilda. I said, "Well, Matilda, you wanted a murder case."

She said, "Yes, Andy."

"Well, found any clues?"

"Maybe."

"What do you mean, maybe?" I wanted to know. "A clue's a clue, isn't it? Not that this is any mystery, anyhow."

Matilda said, "That's what's wrong with it, Andy," and I glared at her, because I don't like people to talk without saying anything. Not even Matilda.

But I couldn't get really mad because she looked so pretty with her face shining with excitement like that, and I had to tell myself to quit being a fool. And I glared at her.

I said, "It'd be simple except for one thing. You can figure it all out. Three days ago Olin goes to see his brother, and his brother kills him and after dark carries the body back to Olin's house and leaves it—and the Lang kids see him. But—"

"But what, Andy?"

"Why? Joe knew Olin was broke, and that he wouldn't be getting anything. Besides, how come he could kill Olin with Olin's own knife? Did Olin bring it with him when he went to see Joe?"

Matilda said, "I found this in Olin's mail box. Just now—I went back there while you were gone."

It was an envelope from the Tri-State Insurance Company. Matilda had already opened it, so I looked inside and saw it was a receipt. It was a receipt for a quarterly premium on a twenty-thousand-dollar policy—taken out some time ago, I'd say, because Olin couldn't have got it after his heart started getting bad.

Matilda said, "I looked among his papers, too, and I found the policy. Joe'll get that clear, and he won't even have to pay Olin's debts out of it."

That solved practically all of it, and I said, "Matilda, I could kiss you!" and then I went on fast to say, "That winds it all up, except maybe about the—"

I heard footsteps coming and I stood up as Doc and Joe Pearce came back in.

Joe's face didn't look calm and unexcited any more. He said, "Darn you, Sheriff, you didn't tell me he was *murdered!*"

I said, "I just didn't figure you needed to be told that."

And I looked at him and said, "Joe Pearce, I arrest you for murder and warn you anything you say will be used against you!"

I heard Matilda give a little gasp of excitement, and I said, "We know the motive, Joe. Twenty thousand insurance that will be yours, clear of debts."

I could tell from his face that he was kind of falling apart inside and that it was the time to throw things at him, so I went on, even if part of it was bluff. I said, "It couldn't have been suicide, because the fingerprints were wiped off the knife. And we can prove you did it, anyway, because two witnesses saw you carrying the body from the direction of your shack to the direction of Olin's house.

"If you think I'm kidding about that—well, the time was midnight, three nights ago. And on less than we've got on you already, any jury in the country will—"

But I didn't go on, because I didn't have to. He slumped so quick that neither Doc nor I could catch him.

Somehow Matilda got there before I did, and she and Doc bent over him, Doc with a stethoscope. Doc said, "Heart's kind of fluttery, but he'll come out of it. Let's put him on the sofa in the back room."

We did, and because Doc said quiet was the best thing for him, and because there wasn't any way out of that room anyway except through my office, we went back there.

I said, "Well, that's that. He'll confess when he comes around."

I looked at Matilda, and there was a funny look in her face and she was staring past me. I turned around and there was Harry Wilks, chairman of the county board, standing in the doorway.

HE SAID, "How goes the case, Sheriff? I heard about it."

"It's all right," I said. "When he comes to, he'll confess."

"Good work, Andy," he said quietly. "I'm glad you're getting it off the books so quickly. Our first murder in—is it fourteen years?"

I opened my mouth to say sixteen, but Matilda jumped in. I mean in the conversation, not in my mouth, but she couldn't have surprised me any more if she had.

She said, "It wasn't murder, Mr. Wilks—it was fraud! But we had to pretend it was murder because maybe we couldn't have proved the fraud. And the bank and a lot of people would have lost money that Olin owed them."

Harry Wilks said, "Huh?" Fortunately, he was looking at Matilda and not at me, and couldn't have seen the blank expression on my face.

Matilda said, "We guessed it all along, Mr. Wilks. It isn't Olin Pearce that's dead; it's Joe Pearce. Joe Pearce must have had a bad heart, too—and when Olin walked over to Joe's place to see him a few days ago, he found Joe dead.

"And Olin got the idea of putting Joe into his, Olin's, clothes and house, and shaving him. They looked enough alike that anybody could take him for Olin, finding him there like that, dead, in Olin's house."

Harry Wilks said, "But—"

Matilda didn't give him time to ask any questions. She said, "And all Olin had to do was to stay on in Joe's shack and let his beard grow and act like Joe. And he'd get the twenty-thousand dollars insurance clear, and wouldn't even have to pay his own debts out of it. It was a perfect way out of his mess! He must have thought of it the minute he found Joe dead."

Harry Wilks said, "Pickle me for a cucumber! But did you have to pretend it was a murder, Andy? Couldn't you have proved the fraud?"

AGAIN Matilda answered before I could—even if I could have.

She said, "How could we have proved it? Neither of them had any other relatives or close friends. Their fingerprints aren't on file, and it wouldn't have proved anything to find some of Olin's prints at Joe's place or the other way around, because they did visit one another—"

"But signatures," Harry Wilks said. "Olin's is on record at the bank."

"Sure," Matilda said, "but you couldn't make the corpse sign to prove his signature *wasn't* Olin's. And Joe's isn't on record, so Olin, pretending to be Joe, couldn't be caught that way. Joe never had a bank account."

"Um," said Harry. "Maybe it would have been tough to prove, at that. You couldn't prove fraud, so you pretend it's murder and scare Olin into— Say, you mean there really wasn't a knife in the body?"

"Of course not, Mr. Wilks," Matilda lied. "But we had to pretend there was to scare Olin. It was really Andy's idea, and I talked Doc Breneman into helping us."

Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of Doc Breneman slipping out of the door.

I knew what he was going to do, and I didn't blame him.

Harry Wilks started congratulating me, but I cut him off and went to the back room. Olin was awake but lying there half dazed. I asked him some questions and got some answers and then I went back to my office and Matilda was there alone.

I was too mad even to frown at her. I said, "Matilda, you put that knife in the body!"

"Yes, Andy. I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid you'd give it away—"

"How did you know it was Joe Pearce you found and not Olin?"

"Little things, Andy, that weren't even clues. I mean, they wouldn't have proved anything legally. Like his being so freshly shaved there was still a little soap on his cheeks. And his hands more calloused than they should have been. And the insurance policy— I found that then. And—well, I just knew somehow it wasn't Olin. So it had to be Joe."

"Matilda," I said, "you could go to jail for tampering with evidence like that. Sticking a knife into—" I shivered a little, and I said, "Matilda, I've got to think this out and it's hard to think while you're around. There's a subpoena in the basket over there. You go deliver it."

She said, "Yes, Andy," quite meekly, and went.

I thought a while, and then I phoned Harry Wilks.

I said, "Harry, you got to get the county board to fire Matilda. I can't explain why, but you got to."

"We can't fire her without cause, Andy. But say, there *is* a rule connected with that job that only an unmarried woman can hold it. Why don't you marry Matilda?"

I said, "What kind of a fool do you think I am?"

He said, "I've often wondered, Andy," and hung up.

I hung up my end of the phone, too, mad as all get-out, and then I got to wondering, too. And after I got that far, I got to seeing that there was maybe more than one kind of a fool at that. And I began getting impatient for Matilda to come back and wished the subpoena hadn't been for someone on the other side of town.

A PLAGUE OF SHOPLIFTERS

by Simpson M. Ritter

LIKE a plague of locusts, shoplifters are once again fleecing department stores in large cities in the United States and Canada of several million dollars annually. Authorities estimate that less than ten per cent of the active shoplifters are professional crooks, but the ten per cent who know the tricks of taking what they want without being detected, account for about ninety per cent of the losses.

Amateur shoplifters are almost exclusively women and include a large variety of types; the young matron trying to keep up with her more affluent neighbors, the kleptomaniac who isn't aware she stole and whose family returns the item or pays for it, the young high school girl hungry for pretty things her family cannot provide, and people who steal to "punish" the store for fancied wrongs.

One version of the last mentioned type has been easily corrected by several New York shops by speeding up cash transactions. Formerly when customers had to wait while their money traveled to a central cashier and their change was made there they would be annoyed by the delay and some would filch something off the counter to compensate for their annoyance.

A favorite stunt among amateurs—generally an original thought with them—is to walk into a department store wearing a cheap coat, try on several of those on display and finally walk off in a new coat, leaving the old one behind. Too frequently, they also leave clues to their identity in the old coat, even after they've been quite careful to remove what they thought would be clues.

Others find a dress they like and then put on their coat over it. Occasionally they miss a label or otherwise give themselves away and are spotted before they leave the store.

It's the professional who really cuts into a store's inventory and profits. One way professionals operate is to learn the account number of a regular client and other information about her so that one of their number can pose as the client, backed up by forged automobile licenses and similar identification. Such a "front" may order $1,000 worth of goods and walk out of the store with it.

Professionals also depend heavily on systems that call for a knowledge of the store's methods. Frequently goods are brought back for a cash refund on the strength of a forged sales slip. Sometimes it works. It didn't in one instance when a syndicate of shoplifters made one mistake only—they forgot that there was a sales tax in New York City and their slips neglected to include this in the total!

Vance leaped at the man with the gun

RETURN TO MURDER

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

Robert Vance comes back to a New England town to clear his name—and finds Death on the welcoming committee!

ROBERT VANCE, recently Number 278043 on the State Penitentiary records, stepped off the bus and looked around. The town hadn't changed much. Most of these New England manufacturing towns never do, especially not in a mere two and a half years.

Vance was twenty-nine, sturdy looking, with brown hair and eyes. There was a determined set to his chin—for Bob Vance was coming back to find out

who had committed the murder for which he had been wrongfully sentenced to life imprisonment.

He saw Wilkinson, the Chief of Police, walking toward him and the Chief had one hand outstretched. Vance took it. He was holding no grudges now because he might need all the help he could get.

Wilkinson said, "Bob, I'm asking your forgiveness. I realize I was wrong."

Vance forced a smile. "You thought you were pretty right back there three years ago, Chief. But then, everyone else believed I killed Bill Blythe. I sometimes doubted my own innocence. I'm not sore, but I'm not forgetting. I've come back to find out who really did murder Blythe."

Chief Wilkinson led Vance to a police car, but Vance didn't get in. They stood there talking. Now and then some passer-by spotted Vance and mumbled a welcome. Vance thought the whole darn town was collectively ashamed of itself for having howled for his blood.

Wilkinson said, "Perhaps they didn't tell you all the facts up there, Bob. You were released because John Maxon confessed to the crime for which you were sentenced. He told us details of the murder that were never really made public. He produced the murder gun. That was just before he died and he wanted to set you free. There isn't any use trying to find out who murdered Bill Blythe. Gramps Maxon did it."

"Gramps Maxon," Bob derided, "could confess to a dozen murders and produce all the evidence in the world, but I'd still know he wasn't a killer. Remember—you once thought I killed Blythe."

"Don't rub it in." Wilkinson frowned. "We were wrong then, but we aren't wrong this time. Gramps did it all right."

VANCE shook his head. "Gramps was dying. He knew nothing could be done for him or to him. He knew I was in prison and Gramps never believed I was a murderer. He somehow discovered a few unpublicized things about the crime and made that incredible confession. Chief, the murderer of Bill Blythe is still on the loose, but he isn't going to be very long."

Vance turned away and walked down the street, carrying the cheap suitcase and nodding greetings to those who recognized him. There were many who did because Vance had helped to put this town on the map. He'd been its leading real estate agent and then with the help of Bill Blythe, who came from out of town, had laid out, built and sold scores of houses for veterans. He'd brought new businesses here, built the town into a first-class little city.

All that had been forgotten when Bill Blythe was murdered. People, for some mysterious reason, decided Blythe was the man who had done all this good for the town. They chose to believe that Vance had robbed them of their most important citizen.

Yet Blythe had gotten away with most of his success through sheer bluff. Vance recalled that all right. He also remembered how Blythe had stolen fifteen thousand dollars of funds held in escrow for someone else and how Vance had made it good.

"Oh, see here," Blythe had said, "I'll repay you in no time at all. In twelve hours at the most."

"It doesn't have to be that quickly," Vance had told him. "But after it's paid, Bill, you and I are finished."

There'd been a battle then. A bad one, and Vance had made some silly threats which backfired when Blythe was found shot to death that same night. The evidence which sent Vance away had been fairly flimsy and all circumstantial. If it hadn't been, he'd have gone to the chair.

During those two and a half years in prison, Vance had found plenty of time to think. He had no suspects in mind, but he did have angles. They needed development. The only thing he was certain of was that Gramps Maxon was not guilty of the murder to which he'd confessed. But Gramps must have had a reason for making that confession. True, he'd always liked Vance and perhaps saw a chance to get him out of prison, but unless Gramps had been positive Vance was innocent, he would never have done such a thing.

Therefore, Gramps knew more than even the confession implied. What puzzled Vance was the fact that Gramps must have known some of the hidden truth even during the trial. So why hadn't he talked then?

A car pulled out of traffic, rolled to the curb and stopped. Someone called Vance's name. He glanced over and saw

Detective Sergeant Algar. There was someone else in the car, but Vance saw only Algar's fat, scowling face.

"You!" Algar called. "Come over here."

Vance put his suitcase down at the curb, set a foot on the running board and shoved his hat to the back of his head. "You might be more polite, Algar," he said. "I know you class me as a jail-bird and under ordinary circumstances I should bow and scrape before the awesome presence of a law officer. But it happens I'm not on parole. I'm free—found not guilty. The whole thing was a mistake, or didn't someone tell you?"

"The only mistake was when the jury entered a second degree verdict," Algar snapped. "Or that I didn't cut you down when I made the pinch. Listen, Vance, I know that Gramps didn't kill Blythe. He said so on his deathbed to get you out of stir. He may have fooled other people, but he didn't deceive me. One slip and you're in trouble. Remember that."

Vance yanked the car door open, a fist doubled. Then he relaxed and permitted himself a wry grin. The other man in the car heaved a great sigh of relief. The other man was David Cowan, owner of several filling stations and a close friend of the detective.

David Cowan said, "Bob—take it easy! Pete's hot tempered and so are you but there shouldn't be any trouble now or ever. The whole thing is finished. Forget it, you two."

VANCE slammed the car door, picked up his suitcase and walked away. Sooner or later he would have to punch Sergeant Algar's nose. He hunted a modest hotel because he didn't have too much money. He checked in, went to his room and sat down on the edge of the bed. The room was small, cheerlessly furnished and he decided his old prison cell had been more comfortable. But he was free to come and go as he pleased.

He unpacked, cleaned up a little and felt hungry. The phone rang before he was out the door. He turned back. A man's voice came over the wire, low and nervous.

"Vance? Listen carefully. I have information for you about Gramps and yourself. I can't come to see you—too dangerous, but it's very essential we talk. Tonight at nine, go to the Fairview Cemetery gatehouse. It will be unlocked. Step inside. If you are willing to talk to me and you are quite alone, I'll come. At nine-fifteen light a match and wave it in front of the east window of the gatehouse."

The phone clicked in Vance's ear. He hung up slowly. They were working fast. They knew very well why he'd come back to this town he now hated. Someone was getting worried.

He went downstairs and ate dinner. More people came over and told him they were glad to see him. Vance remembered the viciousness with which everyone had attacked him when they thought he'd killed Blythe. They still thought so. He could feel it, but they were trying to be good sports about it.

He drank his coffee too hot, just so he could get out of there. Then he went to a garage and rented a cheap car. His next stop was the outlying cottage where Gramps had lived. A white two-story house with a nice sweep of lawn, a white picket fence and an air of serenity matching that which the old man had possessed. There were lights burning. Ann, his granddaughter, was at home. Vance rang the bell.

She hadn't changed much. Ann was still willowy, fair and lovely. She had the clearest gray eyes Vance had ever seen, even though they were clouded with doubt.

"Hello, Ann," he said. "May I come in?"

She hesitated and then stepped away from the door. He followed her into the pretty little living room and automatically glanced toward the big leather-covered rocker where Gramps had always sat.

Vance faced her. "Ann, first of all believe me when I repeat what I told you many months ago. I did not kill Bill Blythe. And I do not believe that Gramps killed him either, confession or not."

She seemed to relax a bit. "Bob—Gramps was ill for weeks before he died, but his mind was perfectly clear. He knew exactly what he was doing. He called in the Prosecuting Attorney, Chief Wilkinson and Sergeant Algar. He told them that he killed Blythe and that he had concealed the murder gun in a hollow tree back of the Alderson place. They found it there. Gramps told them every little detail about the mur-

der. If he didn't do it, how did he know these things?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out, Ann. I need your help."

She shook her head. "No, Bob. Once I thought I was in love with you. About ten thousand years ago. But now you say that Gramps made such a confession only to get you free. Therefore he must have firmly believed you killed Blythe and you were utterly without hope. It was a dying gesture of friendship. Gramps wanted it that way, but I don't. I wish you'd go."

Vance got up quickly, his face pink. Then he sat down again very deliberately. "I'll leave the moment you answer a couple of questions. You know that Blythe was murdered at a few minutes after midnight. You know the date. I had no alibi at all. Did Gramps have one?"

"He was at home, in bed. I looked in on him and he was sleeping. That's why I know he did not commit that murder."

"Okay, I just wanted to be sure," Vance said. "You aren't Gramp's real granddaughter. He told me once. Of course you realized it."

"Yes—I've known for a long time. Gramps took me into his life because there was no one else who'd care for me. He took me out of an orphanage. That is why I am going along with his wishes and not proving to the police that Gramps couldn't possibly have been the murderer. I owe him that much, but I'm doing it for him, not for you, Bob."

Vance shrugged off the rebuff. "Did Blythe see your grandfather the day of the murder?"

"I don't know. Blythe knew Gramps for many years. They came from Elwood—a town far away from here. They were just casual friends. Bob, will you go now?"

HE LOOKED at his watch and remembered the appointment at the cemetery gatehouse. He said, "Yes, I'll go. I wish things were different, Ann, but they won't be until I have the proof of the murderer's identity. I only know now that neither I nor Gramps killed Blythe."

Vance drove slowly toward the outlying graveyard. It was a very dark night and he wished he had a gun. The elements behind the murder knew why he was back. They'd strike swiftly.

He parked the car around the corner and walked to the cemetery gate on foot. It was slightly ajar. Vance swallowed hard, opened the gate and walked up to the little house where records were kept. The door there was unlocked too. He turned the knob, gave the door a push and leaped to one side. Nothing happened. He cautiously stepped inside. He stood there in the darkness, listening intently. He heard no sound at all.

He closed the door, pulled back his sleeve and looked at the luminous dial of his watch. It was almost time to light a match signal that the mysterious caller could safely come. He didn't like meeting an anonymous phone caller in a place as dark and deserted as this. It smacked of a trap, but he had to be sure.

Vance thought it over for a moment, stepped to the office desk and picked up a yardstick. He took a knife from his pocket and cut a notch in the end of the slender bit of wood. Into the slit he fastened a large wooden-stick match. Another look at the watch and he moved toward the east window. He scraped the match, moved as far from the window as possible and raised the extended yardstick in which the lighted match was gripped. He began moving it slowly, as if it were a tiny torch.

He couldn't count the shots. They must have come from some type of gun which emptied itself when the trigger was pulled once. The window was shattered. Slugs ripped through the flimsy wooden walls of the old gatehouse. Bullets whistled dangerously close. He dropped the yardstick, fell flat and squirmed his way to the door. He got it open, took a long breath and raced out into the night.

His only weapons were his two fists and an unholy hatred of the man who had set this trap. He wasn't afraid. There wasn't time for that. He skirted tombstones, crouching as he ran, until he reached the iron fence. There he stopped. A car was pulling away somewhere down the street as if its driver was in a great hurry. The tires screeched as their walls scraped the curbing.

Vance knew then that whoever had shot at him had fired through the fence and made a quick escape. He uncurled his fists and some of the tenseness went out of him.

On his way to the spot where he'd

left the rented car, he noticed the curb streaked with black from the tire walls. This was where the murderer's car had been parked and Vance knew the squealing he'd heard had been the rubbing of the tires against the curb. Those tires would be marked.

He went back to the hotel. There was little more he could do, but he felt smugly satisfied that the murderer had tipped his hand by setting a trap. It was proof the killer feared him. It meant, somehow, that Vance was getting close.

He saw Sergeant Algar's car pulled up near the hotel. Automatically Vance pulled in beside it, got out and looked at the tires. Those on the left side were scraped and the left tires of the killer's car would be marked like that. Vance walked slowly toward the hotel entrance, trying to figure out why Sergeant Algar had had reason to murder Bill Blythe. He'd hardly known the man.

But it came to Vance again that Gramps Maxon had been protecting someone. He also recalled that Bill Blythe, on the day of his death, had confidently promised to raise a lot of cash. Blythe might have had something on Sergeant Algar. It was a chance and Vance was grasping at anything.

He walked up to the hotel desk and asked if Sergeant Algar had been looking for him. The desk clerk hadn't seen Algar. Vance went up to his room. The door was ajar. He saw the streak of light beneath it as he stepped out of the elevator. Walking on tiptoe, he stepped to the door, gave it a gentle push. He was prepared to run, duck, or attack, depending on what he saw in there.

He did none of them for Sergeant Algar was seated in the one chair, his feet comfortably resting on the bedspread. Vance walked in and pushed the detective's feet off. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

He said, "I saw your car out front, Algar. I expected to find you here, but why didn't you at least make a pretense of announcing yourself? The desk clerk didn't see you come in."

ALGAR smiled crookedly. "I used the back door, Vance, because I didn't want you tipped off that I was here. I forgot you might recognize my car."

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting then." Vance reached for a cigarette and saw Algar tense, with one hand moving toward a shoulder holster. Algar relaxed when the pack of cigarettes came out.

The detective said, "I've been here darn near an hour."

"I hoped it might have been three or four hours. What do you want?"

"Just a little talk during which I'll give you a piece of advice. I think you murdered Blythe. So do nine-tenths of the people in town. We don't want you here. Get out, Vance, and stay away."

"Suppose I don't take the hint, Sergeant?"

Algar arose and stood there menacingly. "I'll give you twenty-four hours. If you're still around, I'll lock you up if I have to frame a deal. You're looking for trouble and you'll get it—from me. That's all, Vance—or should I say you will also be booked on a charge of resisting an officer when I make the pinch."

Vance grinned. "That charge would have sticking qualities because if you come for me, you'll have to take me, Algar. But tell me, why am I so dangerous to you? This isn't personal animosity even though you don't like me. I believe there is far more than that involved. Could it be—Ann Maxon, perhaps? She used to be in love with me and you've always had a yen for her. Could it be Ann?"

Algar gave no warning. His fist moved out too fast. Vance didn't duck because he never saw the blow coming. It rocked him back across the bed and Algar leaped upon him. His two hands encircled Vance's throat. He was a powerful man, livid with rage and quite beyond knowing what he did.

Vance tried to raise his knees and failed. He tried to beat at Algar's face and neck with his fists, but the blows were puny and had no effect. Vance felt his lungs begin to ache. The pressure became greater and greater.

Then Algar gave a hoarse cry and let go. He slid to his feet and slowly massaged both hands. "I should have finished it," he berated himself. "That would be the end—"

Vance hit him then. Not too hard, because weakness had softened his muscles. But it was a good enough blow so that it landed on the tip of Algar's nose and drew blood. Algar whipped out a handkerchief and applied it to his face.

Vance held onto the back of the chair. "I'm beginning to think you're a born

murderer, Algar. Maybe it was you who killed Blythe and that's why you're afraid of me."

Algar spoke beneath the folds of the handkerchief. "Think what you like. But make that statement in public and I'll have your hide. When Blythe was killed, I happened to have been busy and I can prove it. Oh, why do I alibi myself to a killer. That warning still holds. Twenty-four hours, Vance."

Algar stalked out. Vance drank a couple of glasses of water, smoked a cigarette and examined his throat in the faded bureau mirror. It was going to be nicely colored by morning. He hated Algar then with an intensity that he had never experienced before.

He sat down by the partly open window to think. Algar's car had been near the cemetery. At least the scraped tires were sufficient evidence to let him think so. Algar's story of having waited in this room for an hour was weak. But why Algar? Vance tried to figure it out and got nowhere. Yet the detective sergeant was his best suspect. Worth working on at any rate. Vance snuffed out the cigarette, cleaned up a little and went straight to the home of Chief Wilkinson.

The Chief was friendly enough. Vance sat down in the privacy of the official's little study and told him what had happened. He added, "Algar is too interested in this business, Chief. I believe he'd kill me right now if he thought he could get away with it."

The Chief shook his head. "Algar hates you because he thinks you'll take Ann away. The fool can't realize Ann cares nothing for him. And Algar is the most persistent man I've ever known. If he gets an idea, he sticks to it. A good trait in a cop, but hardly in personal matters. Bob, Algar didn't kill Bill Blythe. He was off on a trip to bring back a felony suspect."

"But Algar was on the scene of the crime right after it happened," Vance said, quickly.

"Yes, I know. He was put to work on it at once, but he was still booking his prisoner when the call came."

"He might have doubled back," Vance argued. "Maybe made a deal with the prisoner to alibi him. He's only been in town about twelve years. Where did he come from? What was he before becoming a cop?"

WILKINSON had a ready answer to that one. "I have always insisted that applicants for my force be thoroughly investigated. Algar was. He came here from Elwood some fourteen years ago, went to work at a gas station and his record was absolutely clean."

Vance asked, "This gas station where he worked then—was it part of David Cowan's chain?"

"No. Cowan only hit town six or seven years ago. I doubt that Algar knew him before then. I'm sorry I can't be of any help but, if you like, I'll suspend Algar for the attack he made on you."

"Please don't," Vance begged. "If he's mixed up in this, the more rope he has the better. I can take care of myself."

Vance looked up David Cowan's address and drove there, but his home was dark. Vance tried some of the gas stations and learned that Cowan spent a lot of time at the main station, where he kept an office. Cowan was there and glad to see him.

It was a neatly furnished office, not expensive but in good taste. The furniture was oak, the rug a neutral color and the walls were decorated with photos of Cowan's various gas stations. Directly behind the desk hung a high school diploma from the upstate town of Norwood. It was dated 1925. Vance had always thought Cowan older than the diploma indicated — provided he had graduated with his age group.

"I'm glad you came." Cowan shook hands with him. "Bob—it's about Algar. I was going to look you up tomorrow. You've been away for some time. The town hasn't changed, but the people in it have. Three years change almost everyone. Algar has fallen for Ann. Did you know?"

"Not until tonight. He came to my hotel room and nearly choked me to death. That's when I realized his motives must have been a lot more personal than professional."

"Choked you?" Cowan shook his head. "I warned him to be careful. He operates under the theory that since you were in prison, you can't make a complaint about how the police treat you. He forgets you were found not guilty and released with apologies. I'll try to talk some sense into him, Bob."

"I wish you would. Mr. Cowan, what do you know of Algar's background? I know you are his friend and are entitled

to an explanation as to the reasons why I'm investigating him. I think he had something to do with the murder of Bill Blythe. Gramps knew it but protected Algar for reasons that died with him."

"Oh, no. You're all wrong, Bob. Algar hardly knew Blythe and had no reason to shoot him. And I was under the impression that Gramps hated Algar because he'd put you away and some of this hate had been transferred to Ann. But Algar kill Blythe? Hardly, Bob. I wouldn't believe that."

"What of Algar's background then?" Vance asked.

Cowan proffered a metal cigarette box. "Have one, Bob. Well, I've known Algar for about seven or eight years. I liked him and I still do. He came here from some town five hundred miles away. I forget the name—"

"Elwood," Vance broke in.

Cowan snapped his fingers in self-irritation. "Yes, that's it. He was in this town when I arrived. Prior to that I know little about him. He seems to be conscientious, works hard and wants to be Chief some day. He plays incredibly bad golf, drinks his liquor straight, lives right up to his income and is perpetually broke."

"Thanks," Vance arose, "for the cigarette and the information. Especially the last part. If Algar never had any money, he isn't the man I want. Goodnight."

Vance returned to his hotel, slept on the matter, but felt just as bewildered the next morning. He kept his eyes open for Algar, ate breakfast and went to the railroad station. There he bought a ticket for Elwood. He sat down to sweat out the hour and a half before train time. Someone slid onto the bench beside him. It was Sergeant Algar.

"The man who has the railroad station on his beat called in to say you were leaving. I'm a committee of one to help you on the train, Vance. And I'm glad you're going."

Vance grinned at him. "But I'll be back tomorrow. I'm only going to Elwood."

"Why Elwood?" Algar demanded while his face turned crimson.

Vance shrugged. "Frankly, I intend to do some checking on you, Sergeant. That was your town—and it was Gramps' too. He came from Elwood. I think Gramps knew who killed Blythe, but let me go to prison because he wanted to protect the killer for some reason. I think the killer was you and that Gramps' reasons have trails that go back to Elwood."

Algar opened his mouth as if to speak, but clamped it shut again after emitting a grunt that had no meaning. He walked away fast. Vance smiled. At least he had Algar's goat. What did the man have to worry about anyway if he possessed such a good alibi? If he did lack a motive of any kind for the killing of Blythe?

Vance boarded the train, found an empty seat and was glad nobody sat next to him. He wanted an opportunity to think. There were many angles, but none of them led to a definite solution.

ELWOOD was small, an intimate little town that formed a shopping nucleus for farming country for miles around. Vance proceeded straight to the office of the weekly newspaper. Then he questioned some of the older inhabitants about Gramps and learned that the old man had never married. How then, Vance asked himself, had he been permitted to adopt Ann from an orphanage?

He tried to check that angle and couldn't. There were no records to indicate that Gramps had made such an adoption and nobody knew about Ann. When Gramps left town nineteen years ago, he'd gone alone. And surprised everyone too, because Gramps had had an up-and-coming business in those days.

One oldtimer said, "We had a little talk about whether or not the killing next door to where Gramps lived had anything to do with it. Man named Algar shot his wife to death and then ran away with their child. A baby. A few people figured Gramps was the reason why Algar shot his wife, but heck, Gramps was much too old for her. Even then."

Things began churning in Vance's mind. He thought back to the people involved. To Sergeant Algar, Chief Wilkinson, Ann, Gramps and David Cowan. And Bill Blythe, whose death had started this whole thing off. Blythe also came from Elwood, where he'd been known as a shiftless youngster. Vance hurried to get the next train home.

Gradually, during the ride, a pattern took definite shape. He had only one more move to make before all the pieces

fell into place. The train made a twelve-minute stop and Vance got out to telephone the town of Norwood. When he hung up everything was clear.

It was after two in the morning when he stepped off the train. David Cowan was on the platform and came up to him quickly. He took Vance's arm. "My car is waiting. You're a fool to return. Algar is determined to kill you, Bob. He's half crazy with worry and rage. Half drunk, too, I might add. I'm imploring you, for Algar's sake if not your own, to stay at my house until I can get you safely out of town again. Algar is my friend. I don't want him locked up in his own police station as a killer."

Vance whistled softly. "As bad as that, is it? Okay, I'll go with you, Mr. Cowan, but I won't leave town. Algar is in very deep. The information I know must be told to the right people."

"Anything, so long as you stay away from him until the liquor wears off. And hurry—he knows very well when this train gets in. He may come here at any moment."

Vance climbed into Cowan's car. The gas station operator didn't hurry around the car to take the wheel. Instead he pushed a gun against Vance's side.

"All right, Bob, get behind the wheel. Don't make me kill you."

Vance did as he was ordered. Under Cowan's orders and the threat of his gun, he drove through town and directly to Cowan's home. Vance said nothing. He suddenly realized though, just how weak his plans had been. Cowan must have contacted someone in Elwood and guessed that the truth was now known to the man who could use it most profitably. The cards were down now—the curtain drawn aside—and this could easily result in another murder.

In Cowan's spacious and well appointed living room, Vance sat down while Cowan drew all the shades, never taking his eyes off his prisoner. Then Cowan sat down opposite him.

"How much do you know?" he asked.

Vance hesitated, studying the man intently. "Enough to put Algar in the electric chair."

Cowan seemed to wilt, whether in relief or anxiety Vance couldn't tell. Cowan said, "Tell me the whole story,

[*Turn page*]

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San Jose (AMORC) California

Bob. I'm sorry about the gun but if necessary I'll kill you. Algar will protect me somehow. He'll be on my side because I'm on his."

Something creaked in the house while Cowan spoke. Vance heard it and acquired a nice case of goose pimples. Cowan apparently had not detected the noise.

Vance wetted his lips. "Very well, here is the story. After you've heard it, I know you will be content to let Algar take the punishment he richly deserves. Nineteen years ago Algar lived in Elwood. He was married and had an infant daughter. Gramps lived next door to him. Algar, out of jealousy, I suppose, shot and killed his own wife. He ran away and was never heard of again. His infant daughter vanished at the same time and everyone thought Algar had taken her."

COWAN nodded. "You've really got the dirt, Bob. Go ahead and I'll endeavor to correct you if you make any mistakes."

"Not with the gun, I hope." Vance managed a slight grin. "Well, the child is Ann, of course, and Algar never took her away. Gramps did because he was just the type to do such a thing. He never wanted Ann to know her mother was a two-timer and her father a wife-killer. Gramps gave up a lot to do this, but it worked. When I discovered Gramps had never married I knew, naturally, that he would never have been permitted to adopt Ann. From that my whole investigation stemmed."

"And now," Cowan said, "you know the truth. It will hurt Ann. If I have to kill you, Bob, it won't be only on account of my friendship for Algar, but my appreciation of a clean, sweet girl as well. Keep talking."

Vance shrugged and wisned he had a cigarette. He kept listening for more creaks, but heard none. He said, "Bill Blythe also came from Elwood. The one clue which gave me a lead. They all came from that town. Blythe owed me a lot of money. He was broke, but extremely confident he could raise the cash. From whom? Why Algar, of course, because Blythe knew his secret."

"Anything else?" Cowan wanted to know.

"Why, yes. This explains why Gramps never talked even when I, his friend, had to go to prison for a crime I did not commit. Gramps knew Algar killed Blythe, but if he talked, it would have meant exposing Ann as Algar's child and telling the whole world her father was a murderer. Gramps did the only thing possible. On his deathbed he summoned Algar, made him tell the whole truth and then accepted the blame. How else would Gramps have known where the gun which killed Blythe was hidden? And all the other little-known facts about the kill? Gramps tried his best to get me out of it."

Cowan sighed deeply. "There aren't many people like Gramps, Bob. He was willing that the stigma of murder be attached to his name. All for Ann, of course. Now can you see why you must never tell this?"

"No," Vance said. He had moved to the edge of his chair and was tensed. If nothing broke in his favor he intended to leap at Cowan, chance being shot non-fatally, and try to take him.

"You're a fool, Bob." Cowan raised the gun slightly. "I'll kill you before I'll let Ann face all this."

"Ann—or you?" Vance asked bluntly. The floor squeaked again in the hallway.

"Or me?" Cowan wore a puzzled frown.

"Yes—you! I never said Sergeant Pete Algar murdered his wife. I never said Sergeant Pete Algar was Ann's father. I only used the name of Algar. Now I'll preface it with the name of David. David Algar. It fits, doesn't it? You are David Algar, not David Cowan. You didn't come from Norwood and you were hardly graduated from Norwood High in nineteen twenty-five. Because there wasn't a high school in Norwood until nineteen thirty-one. Your diploma is a fake. Your whole life, before you came to this city, is a fake. You are Ann's father and they want you back in Elwood for murder. There is no statute of limitations for homicide, pal."

Cowan jumped to his feet. "I thought you were pretty clever, Bob. I was afraid you'd learn the truth by visiting Elwood. I tried to get Pete to stop you. Then I became convinced you believed Pete was the missing murderer. Either way I'd have killed you, Bob. I'm sorry, but I

have nothing to lose. Once a murderer—well, another killing doesn't mean much.

"Two more killings," Vance said tightly. "You forgot about Bill Blythe. And your borrowing of the Sergeant's car to go to the cemetery and try to kill me."

"Yes—Blythe. The fool came to me and demanded money. Of course I realized it would be only the beginning. He'd bleed me white. So I shot him."

"I know," Vance said. "It had to be you. Pete was always broke so how could Blythe have hoped to blackmail him? And then—"

A DOOR slammed hard. Cowan turned quickly and Vance started to leap toward him, but Cowan was on the alert. He swung around, his gun level, and Vance came to an abrupt halt.

"I don't know who that was," Cowan said. "I don't even care. If it was somebody you planted, I'll kill him, too."

Vance shook his head. "No—it was a man and he overheard every word, but I didn't plant him. It was your brother Pete. Sergeant Algar. So now you'll kill me. But Pete is a policeman—not a plain citizen as he was when you murdered your wife. Pete always took his job seriously. I ought to know that. He'll come back, when he thinks it over. He'll come back for you, pal. What will you do then? Shoot your own brother?"

Cowan gasped and his face ran deep with emotion. He lowered the gun a trifle. "No—I'll make a deal, Bob. I'll let you go. As it stands now, Pete is willing to forget about my wife. He never knew I killed Blythe, of course. He sincerely believed you had done that. He knows now, but Gramps took the blame. Pete will let it stay that way. Nobody is hurt—"

Vance leaped then. His right hand came down and pinned the gun. His left crossed over and hit Cowan flush on the chin. Cowan went backwards a step. He let go of the gun. Vance hit him again, sent him running backwards until he hit the wall and then slid down into a sitting position.

Vance picked up the gun, broke it open and extracted all but one shell. He tossed the gun at Cowan's feet. The

(Continued on Page 155)

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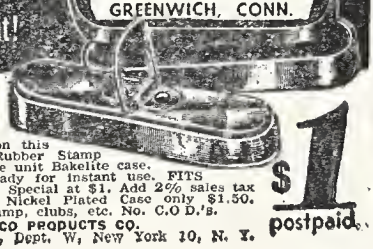

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A Bargain IN CRIME

by SAM SLEUTH

THE recent crop of 25c paper-bound detective-mystery stories to hit the newsstands is one whose volume and quantity are such that the selection of a winning quartet might well have taxed the resources of a Bertillon or J. Edgar Hoover, to say nothing of a Sir Basil Thomsen.

However, we have hewed to the trail without let-up and have arrived at a solution to the overwhelming problem with which we are faced. Instead of coming up with four selections for you, we are for the first time adding an extra winner. The top-flight quintet follows.

Reviews in Brief

DEATH ON SCURVY STREET by Ben Ames Williams

Attractive girls—some of them at any rate—can be magnets for trouble but Molly Bell, waiting alone for her lover in a dark and silent house on Scurvy Street, seemed to draw more than her share. Especially when she spotted the glow of a cigarette in the shadows below and knew others were waiting for Bull Fowle.

There was no chance for her to warn Bull when he turned the corner afoot. Two sharp explosions suddenly shattered darkness and silence alike. Then somebody raced along the pavement and steps sounded on the stairs that led to Molly's room. Suddenly the door was flung open and Molly screamed as she saw . . .

We'll not reveal what she saw at the moment. Suffice it to say that this is the spine-tingling opening of a swift and stirring story by one of the masters of melodrama and mystery.

●

THE YELLOW OVERCOAT by Frank Gruber

Joe Devlin, whose correspondence school for mail-order detectives provided him with slim pickings, was glad to go to work when the blustering stranger offered him an assignment. True—the assignment was a wacky one, involving no more than the finding of a certain yellow overcoat. But if his client was foolish enough to offer four hundred frogskins for it Joe was not going to turn him down. It looked like a harmless rich man's foible.

Joe, of course, was never more wrong in his life. The search took him from a chi-chi Chicago hotel to a Loop flophouse, from clothing stores to a mining town gambler's heaven—and ultimately led him to the horrid discovery that its pursuit was setting him up beautifully as a patsy in a very grim series of murders.

Joe had to sweat blood before he emerged, a wiser correspondence school sleuth—and you, dear reader, will be doing likewise. This one is fast and furious.

●

THE DEATH WISH by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

Every mystery story addict knows that nothing is more deceptive than a perfect marriage—and the union of Bob and Rosalind Whitestone is no exception to this proven maxim. Especially when, after Bob has fallen for the beauteous Elsie, Rosalind is found drowned under highly suspicious circumstances.

The resultant web of rumor and suspicion is shattering not only to Bob and Elsie but to certain of their friends, who also come under the cloud. A real baffler, which allows neither its characters nor the reader peace until the riddle is finally and dramatically answered.

●

BODIES ARE WHERE YOU FIND THEM by Brett Halliday

Michael Shayne, the redheaded private eye of Miami, is in top form in this one, which finds him plagued by the corpse of a girl who gets inconveniently murdered in his office and whose body first vanishes, then turns up in circumstances highly embarrassing, not to say dangerous, for the detective.

The victim, it seems, came to Mike in the

first place loaded with explosive evidence of skullduggery in a Miami mayoralty campaign and is just as hot property dead as she was alive. Mike and his friend Tim Rourke and his would-be nemesis, Police Captain Peter Painter, wind up in a battle royal whose winner is not declared until the last breath-taking second.

●

THE CASE OF THE CONSTANT GOD by Rufus King

Lieutenant Valcour, veteran ace of the New York Homicide Squad, is suspicious of a hoax when he receives a report that a pair of wealthy Long Islanders, Artemus Todd and ca's ablest and most practiced mystery authors. Jonathan Alden, are careening around New York with a dead man in their car.

But he gets quickly after the unknown killer when the corpse turns up in Westchester, killed by a bullet no gun could have fired. And when Todd and Alden take off in a yacht he pursues them across the briny via seaplane—finally to meet through a porthole the gun that cannot exist.

This is a suspense job of the first water as well as a thorough puzzler by one of America's ablest and most practical mystery authors.

RETURN TO MURDER

(Concluded from Page 153)

dazed man winced and turned his head away.

Vance said, "Pete won't wait very long. He'll know I'll talk. So long, pal."

Vance was no more than thirty paces from the house when he heard the single shot crack through the night silence. He got into Cowan's car parked out front. He drove it toward the center of town and the railroad station. Vance knew he'd have to leave town now. Ann's secret was quite safe.

Vance turned right, headed across town and drove past the little white cottage. He gravely tipped his hat to Ann, a turncoat woman with no faith in the guy who loved her. And to the white-haired old man who had been Gramps, a swell guy whose memory might not be pure white, but who had done some darn decent things in his time.

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GOOD CRIMES ARE COMING

(Continued from Page 7)

the hospital she could give no description of her attacker. And the three girls before her were past all talking.

The first victim was Lola Brent, slashed on the South Side two months previously. Ten days before Stella Gaylord, a B-girl on West Madison Street, had gotten hers. And just five days after that the ripper slashed a private secretary, Dorothy Lee by name.

Killing Without Motive

All of the killings were without motive. Each victim was a woman, blonde and beautiful. The only answer—insofar as the police was concerned—was that a homicidal maniac was loose in the streets. A deadly psychopath who loved the touch of cold steel sinking into a woman's soft flesh.

Sweeney shuddered as he thought about it. But, with a chance of getting back into the good graces of his newspaper, the nervy Irishman decided to try his hand at finding the ripper.

His first lead was to contact Doc Greene, Yolanda Lang's business agent. Sweeney met the agent in El Madhouse where Yolanda and her dog, Devil, nightly put on their famous Beauty and the Beast Dance. It was a fateful meeting for the two men took an instant and intense dislike to one another.

Greene accused Sweeney of being interested in the case merely for the sake of dating Yolanda and swore he would do everything to stop him from getting close to the blonde dancer. But, on the other hand, he'd help him all he could to get the ripper.

Lola's Gimmick

Actually, Greene was of little help and Sweeney had to follow his own leads. His investigations took him inevitably back to Lola Brent, the first victim. Using his connections, he got to see Sammy Cole, who had been Lola Brent's boyfriend and who admitted that he and the girl had been working a racket on various Chicago stores.

The gimmick was simple. Lola would get a job in a small shop. When the pro-

prietor went out for lunch or supper she'd make some sales and keep the money without ringing it up on the cash register.

She'd tried the stunt in a curio shop and had been caught. The proprietor had let her go without going to the police. However, it was just the opening Sweeney needed. He visited the curio shop, talked to the owner and learned that the object Lola had sold while he was out of the shop was a black plastic statuette of a nude woman.

The owner had no idea who the customer was, but he did have the only remaining duplicate of the statuette and showed it to Sweeney. There was a feeling of fear, horror and loathing about it. The woman's body was slender and rigidly twisted. The mouth was wide open in a soundless scream. The arms were thrust out as if trying to ward off some approaching horror. And the identifying name given to it by the manufacturer was "The Screaming Mimi."

Sweeney shivered as he held it in his hand. The name was somehow quite apt. Looking at it, he had the impression that

[*Turn page*]

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SEND NO MONEY

it would appeal only to a sadist. On some wild impulse he bought the statuette.

Then a half hour later a waiter in a restaurant made a remark about the statuette that startled Sweeney.

"You know what that statue reminds me of?" asked the waiter. "The ripper. I mean, a woman being attacked by a ripper . . . a crazy guy with a knife in his hand coming after her . . . and she's backed in a corner . . ."

The Death Knell

Sweeney got up, his meal unfinished. Cold sweat was on his forehead. Suddenly he knew why some subconscious impulse had impelled him to buy The Screaming Mimi.

His own hunch that the statuette would appeal to a sadist was right! Two hours before her death Lola Brent had sold a Screaming Mimi. That sale, Sweeney was convinced, had sounded her death knell. The purchaser had been the ripper!

Even so he was far from knowing the identity of the ripper. And he was far from realizing his own personal peril in meddling in the case. He got his first warning of it the next morning in his room in the rooming house (he'd paid his rent with vacation money wangled from his editor) when he wanted to shave and discovered that his straight razor was missing!

Sweeney's gaze lifted involuntarily to Mimi on his dresser. She was still screaming soundlessly. And somewhere in Chicago another Mimi was screaming like that—and with better cause. A maniac with a knife owned her. A killer with a twisted mind and a straight razor!

If you have the courage to go on from there read the next issue of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE and follow Sweeney through the rest of those macabre and hair-raising days in "The Deadly Weekend."

Punch and Power

Turning to our next feature, we'd like to say a few words about "The Dog Died First" by Bruno Fischer. This, too, deals with blood—the blood of a dog and then the blood of a man.

It's a fast-moving tale, well-written

and with a dramatic punch that carries an inevitable power behind it.

Bernard Hall, instructor in Modern European History at East Billford high school, awoke a short time after midnight when a car pulled into his driveway. He knew it was his wife, Dot, coming home from her bridge party at Marie Cannon's house.

He heard Dot go through the back door. He heard water running in the kitchen for a long time. The back door slammed again.

It was five minutes after one. Hall glanced out of the window. He saw his wife carrying a pail of water. She went to the car, opened the rear door, switched on the interior light and began scrubbing away at something inside with a brush.

When she came in she told him she had killed a dog on the way to the bridge party. The animal had run right under the front wheel of the car. She had taken the dog to a veterinary, but the animal died on the way. Blood from the dog had stained the car rug.

[*Turn page*]

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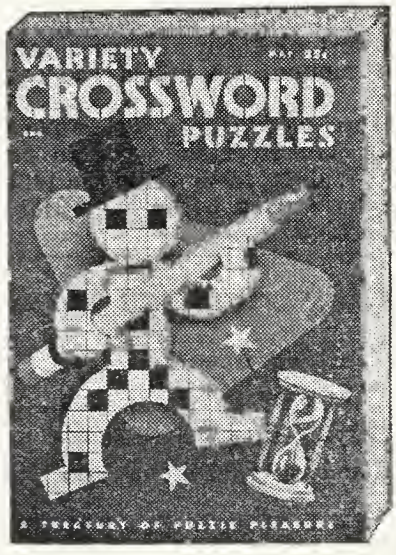

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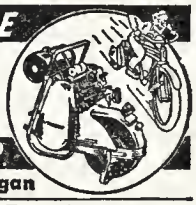

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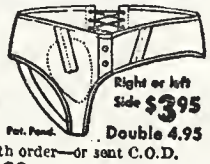

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Hall was ready to dismiss the affair when they saw a man walking around the car in the driveway with a flashlight. Before they could do anything about it he vanished in the darkness of the street. A few moments later the doorbell rang.

The Man at the Door

The man at the door was the man they had seen with the flashlight. He was Detective Ricardo—and he wanted to know about the blood in the Hall automobile.

Dot was amazed that the police should be so interested in the affair. After all, she hadn't meant to kill the dog. It had been an accident.

Ricardo, however, demanded to hear the entire story. She told of running over the dog, picking him up, driving to the veterinary only to find the animal dead. Then she had turned around, driven back to East Billford and left the dog in some bushes beside the road near the intersection of Wilson Lane. After that she drove on to the party.

The detective looked grim. He ordered Dot and Bernard Hall to go with him to Wilson Lane. When they drove up they saw half a dozen men gathered near the bushes.

"All these men because a dog was killed!" Dot murmured, bewildered.

Ricardo took them over to a canvas-covered mound. He pulled the canvas aside.

Dot screamed. Under the canvas lay Emmett Walker, bludgeoned to death. Emmett Walker, husband of Ida Walker, one of the women with whom Dot had played bridge.

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"But—but where's the dog?" Dot stammered.

"There is no dog, Mrs. Hall," Ricardo told her.

That was it! Cold-blooded murder. There was blood in the Hall car. There was no dog. And so Ricardo and the police turned to Dot as the murderess. And their case was strengthened when they learned that Emmett Walker had been a sweetheart of hers before she married Bernard Hall.

It looked bad for Dot. But one man—her husband—had faith in her. And it was his faith that made him take the risks he did in order to prove her innocent. It was a long, hard pull fraught with peril. Look forward to "The Dog Died First" and see how right we are. You'll enjoy it just as you'll enjoy the

[*Turn page*]

NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS

The Deadly Weekend

A Complete Mystery Novel

By FREDRIC BROWN

•

The Dog Died First

An Exciting Mystery Novelet

By BRUNO FISCHER

•

Swift Flows the River

By BRETT HALLIDAY

•

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host of short stories and features that will fill the pages of the next number of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE with thrills and surprises!

FROM OUR READERS

Port Jervis, New York, is the first city represented among our letter writers this time. Miss J. Lott of that city has some very nice remarks to make about MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE. We quote:

Dear Editor: First, I want to thank you for your policy of new detective novels—no reprints. Second, I enjoyed your complete novelet in your winter issue. Third, I also liked that short story called "Why Don't You Go to Bed?" by Leslie Gordon Barnard. His O. Henry ending was very surprising to me. I would like more of them. I hope your magazine remains on the top in 1949. I can't wait for your next issue. Good luck!

Thank you kindly, Miss Lott. Yours was a very nice missive. We heartily reciprocate your good luck wishes and we'll be doing our best now and always to keep MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE right where it is—on top!

From Berkeley, California, comes a note from Tom Hassard, who has a little rave to make about Max Murray.

Dear Editor: That was nice work you did in giving us readers the new Max Murray novel in the Spring issue of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE. Murray impresses me as being a real professional and "The Queen and the Corpse" was immensely interesting. You pulled a scoop, as far as I'm concerned, especially since this chap's last two books first appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Keep up the good work.

Thanks, Tom. We're in business to bring whodunit readers the best in new mystery fiction. That's why we published the Max Murray novel and that's why we advise all of you folks to watch for Fredric Brown's latest opus, "The Deadly Weekend." It's another MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE scoop!

Well, folks, that's all we have the time or space for now. Many thanks for your kindness in writing in and giving us your opinions. Letters and postcards are always welcome. Just address them to The Editor, MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE, Best Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

—THE EDITOR

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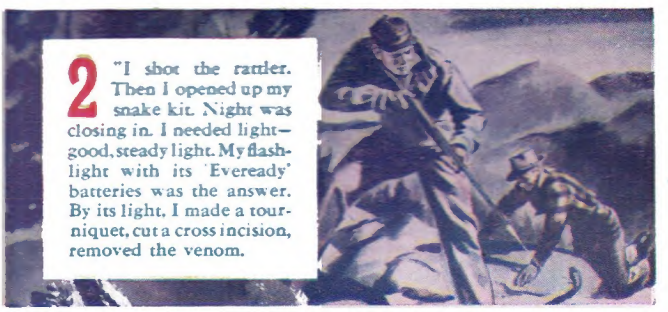
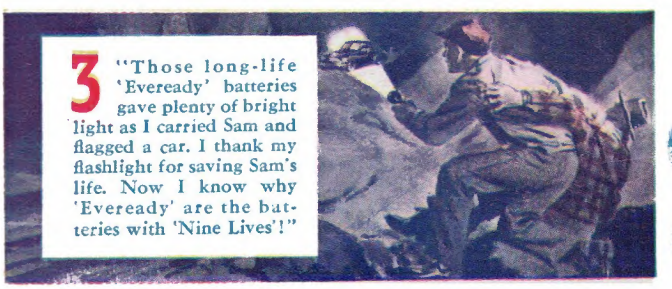


2 "I shot the rattler. Then I opened up my snake kit. Night was closing in. I needed light—good, steady light. My flashlight with its 'Eveready' batteries was the answer. By its light, I made a tourniquet, cut a cross incision, removed the venom.



3 "Those long-life 'Eveready' batteries gave plenty of bright light as I carried Sam and flagged a car. I thank my flashlight for saving Sam's life. Now I know why 'Eveready' are the batteries with 'Nine Lives'!"

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